Ore no Imōto ga Konna ni Kawaii Wake ga Nai Volume 3

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These are novel illustrations that were included in Volume 3

俺の妹がこんなに可愛いわけがない③

俺の妹・桐乃が、どうやら創作活動に目覚めたらしい。ところが、桐乃の書いた小説（ケータイ小説？）とやらは、同じく同人で小説を書いている黒猫にとって理解しがたいものらしく、案の定、口論になっちまった。その上、何を間違ったのか、桐乃が好き勝手書いたケータイ小説がネット上で話題を呼んで、出版社からオファーが来たっていうんだから、俺はただただ驚くしかない。

というわけで、何事にも全力な桐乃が今回発動した“人生相談”によって、俺は、よりにもよって妹と、クリスマスの渋谷の街に繰り出す羽目になっちまった——!?　って桐乃！　さすがにその場所は兄妹で入っちゃマズイだろ!!

ふ-8-7
俺の妹がこんなに可愛いわけがない③
伏見つかさ
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伏見つかさ（ふしみ）

これが人生最後に出す本かもしれない。そう思いながら書き続けていたら、本シリーズも三冊目になりました。有り難いことに四冊目も書かせていただけるそうです。このチャンスを活かすべく、背水の陣を敷いて臨みますので、どうかもう少々お付き合いください。

【電撃文庫作品】

十三番目のアリス
十三番目のアリス②
十三番目のアリス③
十三番目のアリス④
俺の妹がこんなに可愛いわけがない
俺の妹がこんなに可愛いわけがない②
俺の妹がこんなに可愛いわけがない③

イラスト：かんざきひろ

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カバー／旭印刷

主役の座をねらえ！

③

伏見つかさ

Tsukasa Fushimi

Illustration・かんざきひろ

MASOHERA

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おいおい、コイツ、メチャメチャ緊張してんじゃねーか。
……ホントに大丈夫なのかよ？

Ore no imouto ga
konnani kawaii
wake ga nai
③

年齢=彼女いない歴

Tsukasa Fushimi
伏見つかさ
Illustration・かんざきひろ

③

ore no
imouto ga
konnani kawaii
wake ga nai
❸

第一章

Chapter 1

It was September. Three months had passed since that day when my little sister had asked for that ridiculous life consultation.

And just because I promised to help her, all sorts of things had happened around me over the past few months. Just recalling half of them was enough to make my stomach hurt.

I helped my sister make friends with the same interests as her and I went along with her to an assembly of people with those interests.

I even had to put up quite a fight each time her secret was about to be found out.

Even I felt it wasn't like me to do all that for that hated sister of mine.

But I didn't really have a choice.

I wasn't forced to do it by anyone. Those were simply the things I had wanted to do at the time.

I had spoken with her quite a bit over the past few months.

I had seen quite a bit of a side of her – an honest side – that I had not known existed.

However, none of that had led to a change in our cold relationship.

In fact, it had worsened. I couldn't have told you exactly how, though.

I hated her as always and didn't really care about her.

She showed even more scorn and disgust toward me than before.

And yet she still forced unreasonable demands on me in the name of “life consultations”.

I just couldn't stand it.

That aptly summed up the state I, Kousaka Kyousuke, was in.

When I entered the living room, my little sister was on the phone.

She was in her usual spot, seated deeply in the couch. She was wearing tight jeans and had her legs crossed.

The shirt she wore was so baggy the sleeves hid her hands. That must have been part of the current fashion.

God, no matter what she wears, she looks good in it.

I was a bit annoyed when that thought naturally entered my mind.

That good-looking sister of mine was laughing while happily talking about something over her cell phone.

"Eh? No way! So in the end, she dumped her boyfriend? Hehh. So that's what happened. Ah ha ha. I can't believe it!"

Her hair was dyed light brown, she had earrings in her ears, and her long nails were glossily manicured. Her shapely face was attractive enough without makeup, but she still further improved it with careful use of cosmetics. She had a mature air to her that belied the fact that she was in middle school.

She was tall but round in all the right places.

That extremely stylish girl was my little sister Kousaka Kirino.

She was a 14 years old middle school girl. She worked as a model for teen magazines, she was an ace of the track-and-field team, and her ranking on tests had her at fifth in the prefecture. She was an utterly amazing person , very unlike her mediocre brother.

However, she had a secret hobby. That secret hobby was so unbelievable that I doubted my sanity when I first learned of it.

What might that be, you ask? ...Well, it’s kind of hard for me to say it out loud.

My little sister loved 18+ games, what some call eroge.

She especially loved the ones from the little sister genre and she had a collection of them stowed in a hidden space behind her bookshelf.

She also had children's anime DVD box sets and other such things.

When I was first shown Kirino's collection, I thought my eyes would pop out of my head.

It sounds like a bad joke every time I explain it, but everything I have just explained is the truth.

“Yeah...yeah... Okay, see you tomorrow~” said my sister, ending with a coaxing voice before ending the call.

As someone who knew what she truly was, nothing could have been more sickening.

I wanted to get a drink from the fridge, but the living room was connected with the kitchen and dining room in our house. As such, I would have to pass in front of Kirino to get there. I wanted to have as little to do with her as possible, so I hesitated at the entrance to the living room.

Are you wondering why I would do something like that? ...Sigh... Probably, only brothers with extremely unpleasant little sisters could understand how I felt.

Suddenly, my sister's phone started beeping. As soon as she had hung up, she must have received an email.

Middle school girls certainly are a busy bunch. When do they even get a chance to breathe?

"Ugh," groaned Kirino with a horrible expression upon reading the email.

Accompanied by a number of annoyed tongue clicks, she pressed a few buttons and put the phone up to her ear. She must have called the sender of the email.

"...You and your spiral glasses need to hold on just a second! Are you serious!? How about you just die!? I can' t believe you! I told you I didn't want to!"

As usual, she was spewing abuse at a tremendous rate.

(My sister had a public face and a private face that she differentiated between depending on who she was talking to, and I had recently figured out how to determine which "type" of friend she was talking to from her expression and manner of speech.)

From her unrestrained speech and the term "spiral glasses", she must have been speaking with "Saori", one of her private friends.

"...Fine, I get it! You can quit going on about that, I get it already! But in exchange, you need to quit with that disgusting otaku outfit! It's a nuisance being around someone dressed like that!"

While listening to her threatening voice, I resolved myself and snuck past the side of the couch to reach the fridge. I pulled out a can of coffee and brought it to my lips.

"...God, this is bitter."

Kirino hung up just as I was passing back by the front of the couch after finishing off the espresso.

"Aaaaaarrrrrrrrrrrrrgggggggggghhhhhhhhhhhhhh!" she yelled while holding her head in her hands.

What's with her?

"...Quit being so loud. What has you so mad anyway?" I asked my sister despite the fact that I could have just left well enough alone.

"Hah?"

...Why do you always look at me like that? Yes, I get it, I get it. You're trying to tell me it's none of my business.

"...Tch. It's nothing."

As she looked at me with the same look one would give a pile of garbage, I quickly began my escape.

It may seem pathetic, but that was my punishment for having broken our implicit rule.

Our sibling rule was to just ignore each other unless the other asked for a life consultation.

That rule had only been made a few months prior, but I'm willing to bet any household has similar implicit rules even if the contents are different.

If you want to live with someone else, I'd say it's only natural to set up some guidelines of compromise.

Basically, we had a special version of that.

And then...

"Hey," she said just as I grabbed the doorknob to leave the room. It was almost as if she had timed it.

"...What?"

"C'mere a second."

Kirino was motioning me toward her with her finger while still sitting cross-legged on the couch.

That gesture really pissed me off. That wasn't how she should have been acting toward a brother three years her elder.

"Hurry it up."

"...Fine, fine."

I reluctantly did as my sister insisted. Neither of us made any attempt to hide our irritation with the other.

"What do you want?"

“Hah? What are you going on about? You're the one that asked.” Kirino's expression twisted into one of pure scorn. “You want to hear what has me so mad, don’t you ? Then hurry up and take a seat.”

She pointed straight toward the floor. ...This is what I hate. Why did she have to use that tone that seemed to say, “I'm giving you a lecture so get down in your place” ?

Are you that *unwilling to tell me why you’re mad? To hell with that!*

Dammit, I really need to give her a proper talking to...

I resolutely opened my mouth and said, “I can just sit cross-legged, right?”

Kirino's mouth turned down at the corners and she began to speak.

“Yesterday, I hung out with *them* again. They invited me, so I didn't really have a choice.”

By *them* she most likely meant her otaku friends, “ Saori” and “Kuroneko”. Kirino had met them at an

offline meeting for a social networking group she was a part of and had been hanging out with them quite often of late.

"Saori" and "Kuroneko" were both screen names.

To give them a simple introduction:

Saori was over 180 cm tall and had the same measurements as Fujiwara Norika. Her fashion sense and manner of speech were otakuism itself. She always used giant spiral glasses to hide her face.

She was very helpful and acted as the leader of the otaku community Kirino was a part of. She and I were indebted to her in many, many ways. She was the one that Kirino had called earlier.

Kuroneko was expressionless, unsociable, and had quite a sharp tongue. This made her quite difficult to get along with and Kirino was constantly getting into arguments with her over anime and games. All of her hair was long and black, including her bangs. Her skin was pure white. She always wore gothic lolita style

clothes and had a beauty to her of a different sort than Kirino. According to Kirino, she was a “crazy jakigan[1] girl”.

Basically, they were both very odd people.

At any rate, it seemed Kirino had met up with those otaku friends at the entrance to the electronics district of Akihabara.

“And *that black one* didn't show up until five minutes after the time we set.”

You certainly have a short fuse. Is a mere five minutes really worth getting that pissed over…?

As I had that thought, Kirino continued by saying something I most certainly had not expected.

“And I had been waiting since an hour beforehand! Can you believe her!?”

An hour beforehand!? H-how much were you looking forward to this? You make it sound like this was your first date .

Normally, you’d show up late and not care in the slightest.

“Umm... So is that what you're so mad about?”

“I'm mad about that too, but afterwards...”

After they had all gathered, it seemed they had entered Yodobashi Camera to do some window shopping. (This much could just barely be seen as a normal girl activity...or maybe not.)

They had looked at cell phones, they had looked at computers, and they had watched a demo movie being displayed on a TV in the video game section. (Apparently, it was for a game called Super something-or-other Wars) After wandering around the store long enough, they had tried out the new capsule vending machines.

That's right, capsule vending machines. The term had such a nostalgic ring to it. I used to love those...when I was in elementary school.

“I was the only one that just couldn't seem to get a secret one! Can you believe that!?”

“...Surely THAT isn't what you’re mad about.”

"Of course not. I kept at it until I got one~ Hmph. Don't underestimate a magazine model."

A teen magazine model decked out in Shibuya-kei fashion clutching a handful of 100 yen coins and buying capsule after capsule? In the Akiba Yodobashi? ...Now that's a surreal image.

To explain, Kirino is paid for her modeling work, so she has no lack of funds for her hobbies. When she said " don't underestimate a magazine model", that was likely what she was referring to.

At any rate, by sparing no expense, Kirino managed to acquire a "secret one" as she put it. After that, Saori introduced them to a restaurant called Star Kebab where they ate something known as a kebab sandwich.

"A nice foreigner runs the restaurant and it's one thing Akiba is well known for."

"...Hmm."

...Well? When are you going to get to the reason you're mad ? How long am I going to have to listen to a report of my little sister's walk through Akihabara? Actually, you suck at telling stories! Why are you telling me everything from beginning to

end!? Who was late and who was on time and all that about the capsules is completely unnecessary, so do some editing and cut that stuff out of the story!

Of course, I was not about to share that wonderful insight with that sister of mine. She then told me about how they went to places such as Messe Sanoh and Sofmap to reserve games.

There was a question I had had since the time I went around Akiba with those three: Why do otaku go around to game store after game store after game store like that? They aren't clothing stores, so the products for sale should be the same.

“Why did you go all the way to an Akiba game store to reserve them? Couldn't you just buy them at a local store?”

“Each store has a different reservation bonus, you idiot . Like a telephone card or something.”

The word “idiot” had held an amazing amount of contempt for a single word. If only she wouldn't act so threatening toward me all the time...

Incidentally, the reason she went with her otaku friends to reserve the games was so they could trade the reservation bonuses later. For instance, if all three of them reserved two games at Messe Sanoh, Sofmap, and Akibaoo, they would receive three different types of reservation bonus for each game. Afterwards, they could have a discussion to determine the best way to distribute the bonuses amongst themselves.

“There's a lot to all that, huh?” was all I could say.

They must have really wanted to collect goods related to a game they like.

Apparently, some people would buy them up in auctions, so Kirino may have actually been closer to normal by merely trading. As I said before, my little sister keeps her collection of games and goods in a hidden space behind her bookshelf. I had seen a portion of it on that fateful day, and it was a lineup that most certainly could not be shown to our parents. In fact, there was some further threat that I had yet to see lurking in the depths of that hidden space. It was quite a scary thought.

Kirino's story was still continuing.

"After that, we were worn out, so we started talking about just hanging around in Mister Donut."

I was getting worn out myself, so I was wondering if she could finally get to the point.

As I listened despite my boredom, Kirino finally seemed to reach something that seemed like the crux of the matter.

"And then that black one started arguing with me. She was mocking Meruru by saying it was just a kid's anime. "

Not again. How many times have you gotten into a fight over that!? Will you never grow tired of it!?

To explain:

Kirino and Kuroneko were avid fans of the anime " StardustWitch Meruru" and "maschera ~Lamentations of a Fallen Beast~" respectively. The two shows aired at the same time, so there was some antagonism between them.

"So I of course had no choice but to lose my temper, right? Well, I tell her how I bought the DVDs of that

maschera show she likes so much and watched it, but the embarrassing chuuni[2] dialogue, the template jakigan setting, and all the 'I am stroooooonnggg!!' powerleveling disgusted me, so I just couldn't enjoy it at all."

I actually had no idea what she had just said. Sometimes, I wonder if she is even speaking Japanese.

At any rate, I could tell she had gone out of the way to buy those DVDs and watch them just so she could bash it .

It took a spiteful person to go that far just to win an argument.

Although, I also decided she might have wanted to have something she could talk about with her friend.

"And you know what she says? She scoffs and says she hasn't seen Meruru's DVDs because it isn't worth spending her money on. And I bought every volume of maschera~! Apparently, Saori showed her an episode recorded from TV on her PSP, but that isn't the true Meruru! There's no way you can see the brilliant art

properly on the tiny PSP screen! You need to watch the DVD version on a big screen! Well!? Are you listening you damn cat!?"

"Gweh...!? You id –... It's ME you're strangling! She isn't here!"

Pant...pant... Are you trying to kill me!?

I shook my sister's hands off and gasped for breath while holding my throat.

Hah...I get it now. You bought and watched all the DVDs of an anime recommended to you and yet she wouldn't do the same in return. That's why you're mad.

You need to remember that not all middle schoolers are overflowing with money like you.

After getting too worked up and almost strangling her brother to death, Kirino put her hand to her forehead and sighed.

"Hoo... And you know what? While we were going at it like that, that spiral glasses girl butts in and tells us to calm down."

That was the usual flow of events. As the leader of their otaku community, Saori was very tolerant and considerate. She would always act as a cushion between Kirino and Kuroneko.

From what Kirino told me, it seemed the following exchange continued from that point on.

“Hm, hm. From what I can see, you, Kuroneko-shi, and you, Kiririn-shi, are convinced that the anime the other loves is terrible. Of course, every work has those who like it and those who dislike it. But you two have more of a problem than that. You each have preconceptions and prejudices about the other's favorite anime and that is preventing you from enjoying it. If you watch something assuming it will be terrible, you will not be able to enjoy it. And so...” Saori clapped loudly. “ In the near future, I suggest we hold an appreciation party for Meruru and maschera.”

The point was to rid them of their preconceptions and prejudices about the other's favorite anime so they could come to a deeper mutual understanding.

The plan was to have them watch each anime together in an environment they agreed to and where they could comment on them to each other.

"After that, you can hold another debate over the merits of the two works."

That was the judgment Saori had given.

Yet another extremely otaku-ish idea. Would any normal person go that far over a mere anime? I guess it's going that far that makes one an otaku.

I of course knew better than to speak the phrase "a mere anime" out loud.

Saori then gave the following suggestion.

"For an occasion such as this, I would like to hold the event at Kiririn-shi's house."

"Hahh!? Why my house!?"

By the way, "Kiririn" was Kirino's screen name. Pretty damn unfitting, don't you think?

Saori and Kuroneko gave the following responses to Kirino's protest.

“Well, my place is too far away for everyone to gather.”

“I don't have a large TV capable of playing DVDs in my house. Also, I have younger sisters, so I can't exactly have a filthy otaku and a sweets[3] coming by.”

Kuroneko also had a talent for saying things that would rub people the wrong way.

I wasn't quite sure what she meant by “sweets”, but I was amazed that there was someone who could have a proper argument with Kirino. Of course, those excuses were not enough for Kirino.

“I have my parents at home! It would be nothing but a nuisance to have the likes of you over!”

“Oh? Weren't you just saying a while ago that your parents would be out on Thursday for training, so you were going to be watching as much anime as possible right in the living room?”

"Kh... Why do you always pick up on things like that...?"

It was true. Ever since I had learned of her secret, Kirino always watched anime on the large TV in the living room while our parents were out. Apparently, she had been doing so when no one else was home even before that.

As she had been telling them to watch Meruru on a larger screen, Kirino had been cornered.

"Kuroneko-shi and I would love to see where our dear Kiririn-shi lives. Could you prepare the perfect viewing environment for our anime appreciation party? I will make sure to bring by the signed copy of Volume 1 of the Meruru manga that you have been wanting," said Saori, adding her own calm persuasion.

"...F-fine then!"

She had been overpowered by the bait Saori had dangled before her.

"...And that's what happened," said Kirino, finishing her story.

I could only give a curt, “Hmm...”, in response.

After all, it had nothing to do with me. And my little sister having friends over was hardly anything worth making a fuss over. Also, I had plans that Thursday, so I wouldn't even be home.

I see... So they’re coming here. Hmm, with Kirino and Kuroneko together, I’m sure there’ll be quite a fight. That worries me a bit.

Well, Saori will be there too, so everything should be fine.

Overall, I was relatively indifferent about the idea.

On Thursday, I had school off due to a holiday, so I spent the day with my childhood friend.

We went to the bookstore in front of the station to look at reference books, ate lunch in the park on the way back, and spent the rest of the day chatting and snacking at her house. Overall, it was an utterly normal day.

That time was dull and calm. Nothing notable occurred and I grew sleepy.

That type of mediocre lifestyle is exactly what I had always hoped for, so I was glad it could continue uninterrupted.

This is just my personal opinion, but I think happiness is a moment where you can honestly say you are completely okay with yourself and your surroundings.

In that way, I felt my life was heading fully in the right direction.

I bet it makes you jealous. I took pride in those types of mediocre, normal, calm, and boring days that I hoped I would happily be able to continue having until the day I died. To put it simply, I was satisfied with my life.

Of course, my little sister would always smash that normalcy to pieces.

And that is precisely what happened on that day. I parted ways with my childhood friend at 3 PM and walked home while staring blankly up at the sky and yawning.

Hmm, I think I'll read some manga and take a nap to kill time until dinner.

As I returned home with that thought in mind, I noticed a pair of unfamiliar shoes in the entranceway.

They were small, black shoes with frilly decorations. They were clearly not Kirino's style.

"Hm? ...Oh."

I quickly recalled that the anime appreciation party was being held at our house that day.

Kirino's otaku friends must have been over to play.

I walked up the stairs and placed my things in my room. I washed my hands, rinsed out my mouth, and then headed for the living room to get a drink from the fridge.

"...It sure is quiet."

Pretty odd, don't you think? Knowing them, I had assumed they would be shouting at each other in some kind of argument.

When I opened the door, the room was completely dark. It seemed the curtain was drawn.

They're not here? I guess they must be in Kirino's room.

I flipped the switch and the light flickered as it turned on. The fluorescent light must have been about to die.

Hm, we need to buy a replacement before long –

"Wah!"

I almost jumped back the instant the light came fully on.

I did so because I had noticed a girl wearing all black calmly seated on the couch right in front of me. She looked like a queen seated in her throne. She was staring me down with a gaze that felt like pure ice.

As I stiffened and was at a loss for words, she grinned.

"...Heh. Well done making it this far. Most admirable."

"This is my house," I immediately shot back.

Who does she think she is, some villainous boss?

That gothic lolita girl was Kuroneko. I thought of her as Kirino's otaku/arguing friend.

The question I was left with was why she was sitting alone in the pitch black living room after coming to our house to play. I finally managed to get out my first question.

"What are you doing?"

"...Nothing really."

She turned away from me. I had no idea what she was thinking, but I could somehow tell she was feeling down.

Silence returned to the living room. It was truly awkward.

After all, I was alone with my little sister's friend and she wasn't saying anything. What was I supposed to do?

"Nothing, hm? Sigh..."

This girl is as difficult to deal with as ever.

Since you've come all the way to your friend's house, how about you at least say hello to that friend's older brother?

I had no idea what to do in that odd situation, so I just opened the curtains to let some light in. The evening sunlight eliminated all dimness from the room.

I turned around to find Kuroneko squeezing both eyes shut. Her previous cool aura was completely gone. It was the same reaction you get when you poke at a kitten's forehead.

"Sorry, is it too bright?"

"I cannot stand the light of the sun."

What are you, a vampire? Oh, wait. Is that a line from some anime?

"Well, make yourself at ho – ...I guess you already have," I said, stalling for time as I tried to figure out what to do.

I decided I first needed a grasp of the situation.

"By the way, where's Kirino?"

"In her room."

Hmm, in that case...

"Where's Saori? Is she with Kirino?"

"She didn't come."

"Eh?"

She didn't come?

"Why not?"

"Something came up so she couldn't come. She went out of her way to come by my house yesterday and give me this."

Kuroneko pulled out a StardustWitch Meruru manga volume. It must have been the signed copy Kirino had mentioned Saori had promised her. Whatever it was that had come up, she was a very conscientious person.

"I would like for you to take this."

"Fine."

As I took the signed volume from Kuroneko, I thought .

Saori didn't come because something came up. Hmmm, so that's it.

...Mh... I have a bad feeling about this. Wait, wait, wait a second...

"It was just you and Kirino here today?"

"...Yes..."

Now I think I get it.. But wouldn't that mean...?

If Saori hadn't come, it would have been just Kirino and Kuroneko trying to hold an anime appreciation party.

Now *that* was something that would clearly never happen! That goes beyond having mortal enemies sharing a boat!

When those two got together, they almost always got into a fight. How was that supposed to work?

I see! I see, I see, I see, I see. I get it now! It's all coming together!

"And you know what happened then?"

"You got into a fight with Kirino, didn't you?"

"Heh. So you understand. Exactly."

At that point, we both fell silent while still facing each other. I had a fairly good idea what must have happened.

Kuroneko had come to our house for the anime appreciation party. However, Saori had not been there as usual to mediate Kuroneko and Kirino's fights.

When Kirino and Kuroneko unexpectedly ended up alone together...

Well, they must have gotten into a huge fight like usual. And with no one to mediate...

My bet was that Kirino had gotten sulky and holed up in her room.

Meanwhile, Kuroneko had faded into the darkness of the living room.

That was only my guess, but I was fairly confident in its general accuracy. I had to wonder if they really had no desire to get along after Kuroneko came all the way to our house for the party.

"...Hmm."

However, there was one aspect of the situation that I had to make sure not to overlook.

Despite the fight occurring in our house, Kirino had not kicked Kuroneko out.

Also, Kuroneko had still come despite knowing Saori was not coming and she was still there.

Well? Do you think I was overthinking things? I don't think so. After all, I had gone to various places with those three and had seen how Kirino and Kuroneko acted towards each other each time.

My conclusion was –

"You're coming up with some ridiculous idea, aren't you?"

"N-no...of course not," I denied with a stiff smile.

She's surprisingly sharp.

Well, I guess it really isn't any of my business.

I don't think I can last much longer under this damn heavy atmosphere surrounding the house. I only just got home, but I guess I could head out to the arcade and kill some time...

Just as I was thinking that, the cell phone in my back pocket began to vibrate. It was as if it had been timed.

"...Mh."

I had received an email. I had a bad feeling about it and – sure enough – it was from Saori.

Kyousuke-shi. I shall leave the rest to thee.

.....

I stared at my cell phone's screen with dead eyes.

"…Oh, shall thee, Saori-shi?" I muttered dejectedly.

"...Oh, you just turned into Maro[4] for a second. Did you just go insane?"

"...It's nothing," was my discouraged reply to Kuroneko who looked completely at home as she flipped through a weekly manga magazine that had been lying nearby.

Now then, what do I do about this?

I tried to get my brain working on a way to fix the situation. I no longer had the option to ditch them and head out to have some fun. This was because I owed Saori for what she had done over the past few months.

After everything she'd done, I simply couldn't turn down her request. I had to do something.

Damn her. Why did she have to send that email with such impeccable timing?

Saori was quite perceptive, so she may have been able to predict everything that had happened thus far as far back as when she realized she could not come. And her solution had been to have me carry out her usual role. That may be exaggerating her perception, but that was how it seemed to me.

What a pain.

Well, I guess I have no choice. She asked me to take care of this anime appreciation party.

Let's see...um... First, I need to talk to Kuroneko and Kirino to find out what they got into a fight over. Then I have to somehow pacify them to the point where they can watch anime together. But they're sure to get into another fight then, so I'll have to pacify them again.

My goal was to let them enjoy themselves so they could strengthen their relationship.

I had to act as the cushion between them in Saori's place.

"Ugh, it gives me a stomachache just thinking about it."

Is this what she's always doing? But she's always laughing and making that face. Hoo. You really don't realize people's value until they're gone...

It wasn't an easy thing to do. I renewed my gratitude for Saori's friendship with my sister.

"What was that about a stomachache?"

"Nothing."

Okay, time to do this.

I pulled myself together and took action. I decided to start with the girl right in front of me.

"By the way, what were you and Kirino fighting about ? Was it anime?"

"No," said Kuroneko emotionlessly.

However, she just fell silent there and gave no additional explanation.

I patiently waited and finally she sighed and continued.

"I did not come here because I wanted to get in a fight. I knew Saori would not be here and I tried to act accordingly. I came here to watch anime, but I made an effort not to say anything about anime. I think she did the same."

"I...see."

"Do you have a problem with that?"

"O-of course not."

I didn't have a problem with it; I was just surprised.

That makes sense. She was going over to a friend's house for fun. She wouldn't want to choose a topic that would likely lead to a fight.

"Then what did you get into a fight over?"

"A cell phone novel," spat out Kuroneko in annoyance .

What the hell is a cell phone novel? ...Oh, are they those things written and read on cell phones that are popular with girls these days? They are something like a novel I think. That may be a bit off, but I guess it's close. I think they've been making books and movies out of them recently.

"What about this cell phone novel?"

" 'Heh hehn. I wrote a cell phone novel. You've written manga and novels before, right? How about you read mine? Personally, I'd say it's a masterpiece~.' "

"I see."

Her impression was spot on. The way the "heh hehn" got on my nerves made me think she was actually channeling Kirino.

The idea of Kirino writing a cell phone novel seemed disturbingly fitting. It sounded exactly like what a modern girl would do.

From the odd confidence in Kuroneko's impression, I guessed it was Kirino's first one.

"Was it bad?"

"It made me want to kill her."

It was that bad!? What the hell was it about!? That actually makes me curious!

I've gotten mad when reading really bad novels and manga before, but being so bad you want to kill whoever wrote it is something else entirely!

Kuroneko must have been able to tell what I was thinking from my expression because she expressionlessly began to explain.

"First of all, the protagonist is a dead ringer for the author and she even refers to herself with 'atashi' just like the author."

"Now I want to kill her too!"

That was all it took for me to know exactly how " refined" the contents of that novel had to be.

"A-and it isn't just that. She carelessly starts a new line every two or three characters, she starts a new page whenever the hell she feels like it, and there are more emoticons and symbols than punctuation. In fact, there is hardly any punctuation in the entire thing. She mixes first person and third person together making it incredibly hard to read, she switches points of view and uses cutbacks like crazy, the first person sections are written in exactly the way she speaks, half the novel is made up of singing her own praises, and she even breaks the fourth wall to have the author and the characters speak. And on top of all that..." Kuroneko paused her flowing speech for a second. "A gothic lolita character named Kuroneko that is clearly modeled after me gets raped to death."

"That's horrible!!"

That's clearly done only out of spite! Anyone would get mad if their friend showed them something like that!

"...Um, I really am sorry about all that."

Kuroneko nodded and fell silent once more.

I had no idea what to do, so I tried to bring the conversation somewhere less dangerous.

"B-but y'know, you really do know a lot about writing. You also draw manga, right?"

"I don't know...that much. I'm really only barely past being a complete beginner."

Kuroneko glanced over toward me.

Okay, this isn't completely hopeless. Go for it!

"No, I'd say you deserve more credit than that. If I had read my sister's cell phone novel, I would have had no idea how to explain what was wrong with it. You were only able to say what you did because you know the proper way of doing things. You actually know what to look for!"

"...Heh. You seem to be mistaken about something." Now, Kuroneko completely turned back toward me. She seemed to have latched onto the topic I had brought up. "Whether you are talking about manga or novels, there is no 'absolute right answer' as to how to make them. In my opinion, using a lot of onomatopoeia, making constant new lines, using emoticons, or *any other method one may choose* are not necessarily bad things. And the cell phone novel is an especially new medium. Acting like an expert and saying everything must be made in the 'proper' way is not necessarily correct. You can follow the many rules polished up over the years by our ancestors, you can follow the latest trends, and you can come up with some new strategy for grabbing popularity. Each of those things is a 'right answer'. None of them are wrong. However, you should not deny methods other than those either. Looking down on others and going on and on about the 'right way' of doing things and acting like an expert just makes you look like a fool. The shitheads who ramble on and on about a sense of wonder and other things without ever actually saying anything of substance are just as foolish. *What matters is why you are writing it*. That answer will of course be different for each and every person and you will have over a hundred million stories to be told if you gather a hundred people. That is why you can never find an absolutely 'right' way

of doing it. Heh. It's nothing but an amateur's conclusion , but I would say literary works should be made out of a desire to make them not as a job."

Just like Kirino, she became quite loquacious when it came to her fields of interest.

Her overly aggressive manner of speech showed just how angry she was.

"The list I was angrily giving to you earlier was nothing more than what I personally disliked. Please make no mistake about that."

"...I see."

I honestly had no idea what she meant, but it seemed Kuroneko had been able to let off some much needed steam.

Her depressed mood from earlier had lessened.

One down. That just leaves...

"Anyway, I'll go prepare some drinks and snacks. Just wait here."

"I came to a girl's house, so why am I instead spending the time with her older brother?"

"I honestly don't know."

Can someone please tell me why I'm spending my holiday working to put my little sister's friend in a good mood?

I left the living room and walked up the stairs.

I was not preparing snacks; I was on my way to speak with my sister.

"Kirino... Hey. I know you're in there. Open up."

I knocked lightly so that Kuroneko would not be able to hear from the living room.

After I had knocked for a while, the door violently opened. It was as if opening the door had been an attack aimed at my face. However, after so many times, I was prepared for that attack. I stopped the door with one hand.

Kirino clicked her tongue with an expression that said, “Tch. I missed...”

“...What do you want?”

“Don't play dumb. What are you doing up here instead of having fun with your friend?”

“Playing eroge. I was just reading the blog of my true little sisters.”

“...!!!”

Don’t give that kind of answer so boldly! You’re giving your brother a headache here!

“What’s with that ugly face? You gotta problem with it ?”

“Um, yes!? No one calls their friend over to their house and then just plays games alone!”

“...Hah? What, do you want us to play an eroge together? Heh. Perverts like you really do have a different way of thinking.”

"Y-you bitch..."

Gyahhh!! You piss me off! And how can you say that playing an eroge together is a pervert's way of thinking? I seem to recall you ordering me to play an eroge with you three months ago!

That pervert is always blaming other people for the exact things she does!

Kh...no, I need to calm down. I'm trying to get them to make up, so I can't be getting into a fight with her myself.

I gritted my teeth and shoved the anger deep into my chest.

"Kirino-san...Your friend is over, so I think it would be best if you would spend time with her."

"Shut up."

Kirino narrowed her eyes in displeasure and tried to close the door.

Wh-why you...!

I managed to stop her by putting my own body in the door's path.

"Owww!"

You slammed that shut as hard as you could! You clearly saw what I was doing and a normal person would have at least slowed down the door! But you actually put more force into it, didn't you!?

"Ueh. What a disgusting feeling."

You're making it sound like you just stepped on a frog! It's your brother that you crushed here!

Why does it always take so much effort whenever I try to have a conversation with my sister!? Shit! This just isn't right !

At any rate, my actions paid off and my sister's escape route was blocked. I was in an incredibly pathetic position, but I could at least speak to her. First I had to hear Kirino's explanation of why she got into a fight with Kuroneko.

"Y-you know, your friend went out of her way to come over, so at least *try* to get along. Don't just fight."

For some reason, I constantly had to tell my sister things like that that should be obvious.

"I-is that normally the position someone tries to persuade someone from?" said Kirino in a voice that sounded almost surprising admiring of her brother who was caught in the door.

Of course, if she was truly admiring of what I had done, don't you think she would have lessened the force keeping me pinned there? Kirino did not exactly go along with my desire, but she did give me a response.

"I wouldn't call that...thing...a friend. And it's because of her that we got into a fight~!"

"Liar. Kuroneko told me you had a character in your cell phone novel that was similar to her and you had the character raped to death. You're clearly the one at fault here!"

"Hah!? What are you talking about!? You've got it all wrong!"

"Wh-what do I have wrong?"

Without answering my question, Kirino let go of the door and entered her room.

As I freed myself from my crushed position, my head was filled with question marks.

Kirino used a finger to invite me into her room.

"Come in."

"S-sure..."

As usual, I was very reluctant to enter my little sister's room.

It was a refreshing room that was colored red overall. It had an oddly sweet smell to it.

It had a bed, a computer desk, a bookshelf, etc. Basically, nothing about it was out of the ordinary. Perhaps because she had known friends were going to be coming over, a fold-up table was set up in the center of the room. A cell phone and some black books were placed atop that table.

Kirino sat down on her bed and pointed toward one of the black books.

“Read that for a bit.”

“Wh-what is it? And what does it have to do with what we're talking about...?”

As my sister had ordered, I picked up the indicated black book and flipped through it. The cover had an illustration of a gothic lolita girl drawn in the style of a painting. The title was written in stylish cursive English.

And as for the contents...

“A manga...and...a novel...?”

“And excessively thick supplementary materials.”

“...What the hell is it?”

“A doujinshi. It's a derivative work of maschera that Kuroneko made,” spat out Kirino in annoyance with a slight frown.

Simply put, a doujinshi was a book created out of pocket that was then bought and sold at some kind of

event. A derivative work was one that used the setting or characters of an existing anime or manga. All of that had been explained to me back when I had been dragged to that offline meeting, so I had some knowledge of it.

"So what about this doujinshi?"

" 'Heh… Then while I read this cell phone novel that clearly reeks of terrible writing, you can read this. You watched every episode of maschera, right?' "

"I see."

Her impression was spot on. The way the "heh" made it so clear she was looking down on you made me think she was actually channeling Kuroneko.

A doujinshi made by Kuroneko, hm? I can already guess something she made would not fit Kirino's tastes...

"Was it bad?"

"It made me want to kill her."

It was that bad!? And didn't I just have almost this exact conversation with Kuroneko!?

"Wh-what is it about?"

"...Tch. It's what's known as a 'retrogressive story' and the protagonist is quite a 'U-1'."

"Is that some kind of code?"

From the literal meaning of the words, I could take a guess at what a retrogressive story was, but the term U-1 was a complete mystery. My first guess was that it had something to do with a martial arts tournament.

Kirino must have guessed what my questions were because she explained with a displeased expression.

"Retrogressive story and U-1 are terms used when describing derivative works. As you might guess from the meaning of retrogressive, a retrogressive story is a story where the protagonist travels back in time[5]. To use Evangelion as an example, if you have a story where Ikari Shinji travels back in time from the world after the finale to the time of the first episode with all his memories of the events intact and then redoes his fight against the angels, that would be a retrogressive story. Having memories of the events gives the protagonist courage, so he can change history as he sees fit. Authors

of derivative works are pinned down by the original story's setting, so this allows them to make a completely different story to the original.”

“Hmm.”

I wasn't quite sure what she meant since I had never actually seen Evangelion.

However, I caught enough to figure out that she meant it was a story where the protagonist had an overwhelming advantage at the start in order to “make a completely different story from the original”.

“And U-1 refers to adding all sorts of extra things to the protagonist to make him or her almost almighty and the strongest character[6]. You could say they are the descendent of a demon king but the powers gained from that blood is usually sealed, you could have them win over any member of the opposite sex with just a smile but the protagonist doesn't realize it, you could have seraphim wings grow from their back when they go all out, or you could have them actually have S rank level powers but only be B-rank due to not applying for S-rank . At a time, those things were popular in the derivative works of a popular eroge and the term U-1 came about as

a parody of the name of the game's protagonist. The term Super Shinji has pretty much the same meaning.”

“Th-that's all a little confusing…”

First Kirino's excessively detailed rant and now this! This is going to be harder than I thought!

“So anyway, you were saying the doujinshi Kuroneko wrote had a retrogressive story and a U-1...”

“Right. After the final boss of the first season of maschera, Queen of Nightmares, was defeated by the show's protagonist, Shikkoku, she ‘retrogressed’ to the time of the first episode with all her memories intact. From there, she possessed the corpse of a female character that died in the original story and approached Shikkoku as a normal girl. And that's just how it starts.”

“Mh... So unlike the original, the final boss becomes the protagonist.”

“Right. That black one is always cosplaying as Queen of Nightmares, so she's clearly projecting herself into the place of the protagonist of her own work. At that point it was already so painful that I had goose bumps. Oeh...”

You said all that to Kuroneko, didn't you? I can see how that would start a fight.

You really are the one at fault here.

"So why was that enough for you to want to kill her? I mean this art...well, I don't like how pointed the chins are , but it's not bad overall. And from what you told me of the story, it sounds a little interesting."

"Hah! ...Don't act like you know what you're talking about just from hearing a brief summary and glancing at the art. The worst parts of this doujinshi aren't something you can see on the surface."

"…And those things are?"

"It doesn't just jump out at you? Look through all the pages. This book is incredibly hard to read," muttered Kirino frankly as she pointed at the pages of the novel portion. "Look how black this page is. Over 90% of it is a wall of text. Why doesn't she hit the enter key every so often!? Also, she uses all sorts of difficult kanji and expressions. She goes on and on about parts of the setting I couldn't care less about. She clearly isn't thinking about the people who will be reading it at all. And the battle scenes are the worst of all! They're so hard

to read! If you're having an explosion, can't you just put in a line saying *Boooom*!? Onomatopoeia exist for a reason . When you use it, anyone can tell what's happening at a glance. And when someone's attacking, she needs to have the character yell ‘Ohhhh!’ and when a character takes damage they need to yell ‘Gyaahh!’ That makes it all so much easier to understand and easier to read. That way anyone can read it, right? If you ask me, her novel is nothing more than self satisfaction.”

I never read novels, so I had no way to know whether the things she was saying were right or not.

But even so, the way she said them pissed me off.

In fact, what Kirino was mentioning was how she wrote her cell phone novel. With a different genre and medium, the valid methods probably changed. Also, Kuroneko hadn't written that novel to sell, so I felt there was nothing wrong with writing it with a focus on self satisfaction.

“And this doujinshi comes with a separate book that has about 200 pages of supplementary materials. If you don't read it first so you can understand the original terminology that doesn't even exist in the original series,

you won't be able to understand half of the actual doujinshi. Oh, and her original terminology just reeks of chuunibyou. Look at this: God-Demon Utter Destruction Shock! I can't read a string of kanji like that! And it has some lame katakana ruby added on. And it's some weird German or something! And what gets to me the most...” While grinding her teeth, Kirino paused for a second before spitting out the rest. “An original character clearly modeled off of me had the magic spell Charm cast on her so she becomes the protagonist's sex slave.”

“You're free to get mad about that!”

A few seconds before, I had thought Kirino was at fault for the fight, but at that point, I suddenly lost all desire to defend Kuroneko.

What is that gothic lolita girl doing to my sister!? They're both at fault in this fight!

And you both did almost the exact same thing!

They had both put the other in their works and had them meet some horrible fate.

They had let the other read their work while looking down on them.

That had led to a fight, to Kirino sulking, and to the current situation.

"...Sigh."

But Kirino, you...

"Did you read that entire ridiculously thick supplementary book?"

"Hah? *Of course I did. If I didn't, I would have no right to complain about it*."

That was just how she was. What do you think? Makes you want to scowl, doesn't it?

It makes you wonder how well they actually got along.

If Saori had been there, she would surely have roared with laughter will holding her belly.

God, what troublesome girls...

At that point, I had heard both sides of the story, so I had cleared the second stage.

I just had to bring them from the current situation to one where they could hold the anime appreciation party.

I had no idea if I could manage it, but I decided to do what I could.

Oh, and I had one last thought.

Middle school girls shouldn't suddenly start saying things about sex slaves! I'll make sure to stop you next time!

I entered the living room with a tray containing snacks and drinks.

Kuroneko was seated on the couch, relaxing. She was in the place Kirino usually used, so it felt a little odd. I almost felt like I was talking to my little sister when I spoke.

"Sorry about the wait."

"You had better be. How long does it take to prepare snacks and drinks?" muttered Kuroneko while looking down at one of Kirino's teen magazines.

Why are you so demanding when you're a visitor in someone's house? You really do remind me of a certain someone.

With that thought in mind, I lined the snacks and drinks up on the table.

Now then, time to begin.

I also placed a DVD case on the table.

"It took some doing to get this."

"This is..."

Kuroneko's eyes narrowed upon seeing the DVD case.

The DVD I had brought was the first volume of StardustWitch Meruru.

"Why did you bring this here?"

"I borrowed it so we could watch it together. Let's watch it on that big screen so we can see the true Meruru, " I said in voice half-filled with resignation.

With no change of expression, Kuroneko's gaze turned toward me.

“Have you ever seen this anime?”

“No. In fact, I never really watch anime. But after hearing Kirino go on and on about how good it is, I'm a bit interested. It would help me out if you help explain some things.”

After a bit of silence, Kuroneko finally picked up the Meruru DVD case, scrutinized it deeply, and then held it out toward me.

“Here.”

“...Okay.”

I took the DVD case, walked up to the TV, and put it in .

After the DVD disk tray slid back in, the TV screen lit up.

It was displaying the menu screen. I ignored the various special features like bonus footage and voice

actor interviews, chose the “from the beginning” option, and hit the button on the controller.

A pink-haired girl wearing an oddly suggestive outfit walked out from the edge of the screen.

She spun around in the center of the screen with a “kururin♪” sound effect, held up a wand (or was it a spear?), and shouted out in a high-pitched loli voice.

“StardustWitch Meruru♪ Begins noooowww♪”

O-oh, no. This is way more embarrassing than I thought it would be...!

I could feel my face growing red.

However, I couldn't exactly suggest we stop after being the one to suggest we watch it.

I gritted my teeth and entered defense mode.

However, what happened next ripped my defenses to shreds like they were made of paper.

The screen changed to show a girl standing in a field. She looked a lot like Meruru, but she was wearing

normal clothes. She was also wearing a red randoseru[7], so I guessed she was in elementary school.

The girl shut her eyes and held her hands together as if praying. The camera started circling around her, a pink light and stardust started flowing out from the girl, and music started playing.

The girl spun around wrapped in light. Her clothes started disappearing one by one. First her shirt, then her skirt, then her camisole, and then her panties.

“Isn't this a bit much!? Can they even show this on TV!?”

“This is the DVD version, so there is no problem. I believe most areas had a censored version where tons of ribbons and stars covered up the heroine's nudity. I remember people on Nico Nico Douga going crazy uploading the uncensored transformation scene that was aired on TV Aichi.”

“...”

A cold sweat stared pouring from my forehead.

Why do I have to watch an elementary school girl's strip show with my little sister's friend?

I looked over toward the living room door, hoping for rescue.

But there was no sign of anyone opening the door.

Dammit, still? That girl needs to get her ass down here.

While I frowned, the tension of the music rose and rose.

And then the title, "StardustWitch Meruru", was displayed.

As soon as it did, Kuroneko whispered, "The first reason I simply cannot enjoy this anime..."

Meeru meru meru meru meru meru me~ Meeru meru meru meru meru meru me~

A shooting sta~r sparkling in space~ Blasting my enemies with a magical jet~

Shooting through the sky and falling to Earth from a magical land, here I am~

Stardust Witch Meruru~♪

"...is the nonsense theme song."

"Gh...uuh..."

I could feel my face growing pale.

This is indeed...painful...

I don't think this is just a difference in tastes between otaku and normal people. Kuroneko looks like she's suffering, too.

"Hoo... Hey, do you want to play a video game? Kirino has some in her room, so..."

Just as I reached for the controller, Kuroneko grabbed my wrist.

"I thought we were going to experience the true Meruru? At the very least, we need to endure this level of embarrassment."

"U-uuh..."

What idiot was it that suggested we watch Meruru!?

As I listened to the theme song, "MeteoImpact" (sung by Hoshino Kurara, the voice actress for the protagonist Akaboshi Meru (Meruru)), I was overwhelmed by embarrassment and regret.

Shoo~ting Star~♪ Shoo~ting Star~♪ Charging straight for your chest.

With a power (Kira) larger than a meteorite (Kira)

I will aim for your heart. So. When.♪ My full power ♪ My all-out magic♪

Comes your way, make sure to catch it all~

"Hey, did that kid just blow an enemy away with a giant laser while singing the chorus?"

"The lyrics are basically saying 'I am going to fire all my magic at you at point blank range, so don't run away' . What a disturbing anime."

According to Kuroneko's explanation, Meteo Impact was the name of Meruru's ultimate attack.

She would go into a spin in midair and strike the enemy, piercing the enemy through the heart with the tip of her wand.

She would then fly at high speed and low altitude with the enemy still skewered and dragging the enemy along the ground.

After that, she would fly back high into the sky and spin around, performing essentially a giant swing with the enemy on her wand. Centrifugal force would slam the enemy to the ground and she would finish things off by yelling "Gooo! Meteo Impaaaact!" and firing a giant laser straight down.

"The protagonist performs that string of attacks with an innocent smile on her face all the while. I do not think it is right to do such repulsive things while pretending to be a children's anime."

Well, that ultimate attack IS harsher than what you find in some shounen manga. The rival girl she was facing in the opening was probably torn to pieces.

"Lately, too many works are shoving loli and fanservice to the forefront to get sales. And not just in anime. I have no problem with making something to answer the demand out there, but something this blatant is too much. I hate all this talk about unprecedented levels of DVD sales. In my opinion, we should be lamenting the fact that this kind of vulgar trash is selling. The masses need to develop better aesthetic sense."

I was still trying to figure out how to respond to that, when...

"You just don't understand!"

The door was violently kicked open and someone stormed in.

"K-Kirino..."

I pretended to be surprised, but I was secretly relieved.

O-okay, somehow or other, this is working.

When I had borrowed Meruru from Kirino I had told her to come down to the living room because Saori's present was there.

That girl is about as stubborn as you can get, so I had known she would never come down if I tried to convince her normally.

However, I had guessed that she would be unable to resist barging in if she heard Kuroneko and me watching and talking about her precious Meruru.

Just as planned. Wow, look how mad she is.

“Meruru's theme is friendship! Don't start making up crap about it being repulsive just because maschera's DVDs didn't sell! And you think you have ‘better aesthetic sense’? Hah! Quit acting so self-important. You're practically blind when it comes to aesthetic sense. Is your ‘better aesthetic sense’ what leads you to call everything trash just because you can't understand what's so good about it? You're such an idiot that you can't even see the message the writers have put into Meruru. Actually, how far did you watch on the PSP, you damn cat? Surely you at least got as far as the end of the first season!”

“What are you doing here? No one asked for you.”

"Shut up! I just came down to get a drink, but then I heard something I simply couldn't overlook! ...Well!? How far did you get!?"

Kirino stomped forward and Kuroneko glanced at the intruder with cold eyes.

"Partway through episode 6."

"Wait! Why would you stop there!? That's a really good part!"

"The friend infected by an Evil Star parasite and turned into a Dark Witch in the A-part was mercilessly vaporized by Meruru in the B-part. She used Meteo Impact on her. I had felt obligated to at least watch to the end of season 1, but that was the last straw. How can you call that a story about friendship? Could you perhaps explain that to me?"

"Hahh? What show were you watching? She had no choice but to do that at the time. If she hadn't, the earth would've been destroyed and then Aru-chan would have died all the same."

"Even so, smiling and yelling 'Gooo! Meteo Impaaaact! ' when it's your best friend is simply unthinkable. That girl is a natural-born psychopathic killer."

"Don't worry! She was revived afterwards! Before the battle, Meruru had set up a Magical Field, and anyone killed or anything damaged in one of those is healed or fixed afterwards!"

"So they just rip off other shows? ...Anyway, I don't like it, but I will admit that, with that magic available, that was the best decision at the time. However, it is still wrong how unhesitant she was and how she was not shown shedding even a single tear. Is a side effect of using magic inciting murderous urges or something?"

"Shut up! Quit being so picky! What does it matter anyway? She saved her in the end! Aru-chan even thanked Meruru for saving her!"

"And that is why I am saying it is nothing but a children's anime. It depicts so little that you can barely tell what happened."

"You sure are stubborn. ...But wasn't it so cool when she used her new ultimate attack and was twirling all over the place with god-tier art?"

"Perhaps, but she was still murdering her best friend."

"Like! I! Said!"

Why are anime otaku so damn annoying!?

I was getting sick of the argument, but Kirino and Kuroneko were merely continuing on noisily as always.

Suddenly, Kuroneko grabbed the controller and paused the footage on the TV.

"Heh. You said the glorious artwork could not be truly seen on a small screen, right? In that case, let's watch it right now. Bring out the DVD with episode 6 on it."

Those belligerent words were clearly a challenge.

"Oh, now you've said it! There's no going back now. I'll be right back with it." Kirino pointed straight at Kuroneko's face. "Hah! I can't wait to see the tears in your eyes!"

She then ran up the stairs.

What are you, a child?

God, what a pain. Although, it looks like the anime appreciation party might happen after all. It's still too early to relax, though.

I looked in the direction of the door my little sister had left through and sighed.

In the end, time ran out after we finished watching Meruru episode 6. The anime appreciation party had only lasted 30 minutes, but that was the best we could do . If I had come home earlier things might have been different.

As soon as it reached five o'clock, Kuroneko said she was leaving. I did not even need to ask why she had to leave at what seemed like an elementary school kid's curfew.

Meruru and maschera both aired on Thursdays at 5:30.

By the way, Kirino and Kuroneko had continued arguing in the same way the *entire time* we watched Meruru. I wasn't sure if they were a good match or a terrible match as friends, but I tried to pacify them, humor them, and praise them. In return, I was slapped, kicked, and verbally abused. Amid all that, I somehow managed to outlast and fulfill my role as the cushion between Kirino and Kuroneko.

You can probably already tell from what you've seen of this so far, but it wasn't easy.

I gained some serious respect for Saori for always smiling while doing that. I mean, it was basically like having two Kirinos. A scary thought, I know. To be honest, I was saved thanks to the fact that it ended after only half an hour.

“I'll be borrowing this,” said Kuroneko, standing in the entrance of the Kousaka residence and holding up a paper bag.

The bag contained the StardustWitch Meruru DVDs we had not been able to watch due to lack of time.

Arms folded, Kirino gave a triumphant reply.

"Heh hehn. Looks like you've finally awoken to the wonders of Meruru."

"Please don't be so foolish. I will admit that a portion of the art in the battle scenes was fantastic and that the DVD version did an excellent job of correcting the terrible art from the TV version. However, my opinion that the story is shit remains unchanged. ...Heh. It has barely enough value for me to feel obligated to watch it to the end."

"Wow, are you stubborn. Couldn't you just be honest and say you liked it and want to see more?"

I glared at Kirino thinking, *You're not one to talk.*

I then pulled myself together and looked back toward Kuroneko.

"Thanks for playing with Kirino today." I relaxed my shoulders and smiled a bit. "Come back anytime. We can have a proper anime appreciation party next time."

Kuroneko stared me straight in the eye.

"There is something I have been curious about for a while now. This is as good a chance as any, so I'll ask now. Why do you do these things for your sister despite how cruelly she treats you?"

Now that was a good question. I honestly didn't know. It had started out with me just going with the flow and it was actually still that way. But that's not all there was to it, was it? I'd rather not admit that, though.

In the end, there was only one thing I could say.

"Sorry, I don't really know."

"...Are you a siscon?"

"It's definitely not that!"

Why would you say that!? Of course I'm not!

As I denied it with everything I could, I was kicked in the Achilles tendon by the tips of someone's toes.

"Ow –... What the hell are you doing!?"

I turned around in anger to find Kirino staring at me with a contemptuous gaze.

"...Gross."

Honestly, what the hell!? I know you don't like the idea of me being a siscon, but I wasn't the one to say it! In fact, I denied it! You don't have to kick me out of the blue like that!

As I continued getting kicked, Kuroneko said, "...Are you a masochist?"

"It's not that either!"

I think!

"...Then what is it?" asked Kuroneko as she tilted her head to the side.

For some reason, she seemed quite attached to that subject. She did not seem as if she would quit until I gave her a satisfactory reason.

I guess I have no choice...

I scratched at my head and tried to give form to the concept I was having trouble putting to words.

After searching for the right words, I finally uttered a truly hackneyed line.

"...It's because we're siblings...I guess."

I averted my gaze and massaged my temples.

I clicked my tongue in an attempt to draw attention away from the heat in my face.

This is hopeless. I'm the one that said it and I know that doesn't cut it as a reason. There's no way Kuroneko will accept it.

Or so I thought.

"...I see. Understood."

Kuroneko nodded slightly.

Her soft voice gradually filled my chest.

"What an excellent older brother. I am quite jealous," she whispered to Kirino.

Normally, Kirino would have responded with something like "What was that, sarcasm?", but she only continued frowning with her arms folded. Some kind of silent exchange went on between them, but I could only watch without understanding what it meant.

After the silence had continued for a bit, Kirino finally arrogantly said "Hmph" and narrowed her eyes toward Kuroneko.

"Hehh... What's this? Is he your type? What terrible taste."

"....."

Kuroneko remained silent but her eyes opened wide.

"I won't stop you, but let me warn you. He only likes ugly girls."

"What the fuck did you just say!? Who are you calling an ugly girl! Depending on your answer, I'll kick your ass even if you are my little sister!"

"Ugh, and now you get mad again. Fine, fine. I'm sorry~."

Kirino mockingly shrugged.

Why you...! That attitude is just going too far!

I was about to speak my complaint out loud, but Kirino turned back toward Kuroneko.

"If you want him, you can have him. In fact, he disgusts me, so just take him home with you."

"Why you..."

As my fist trembled in anger, Kuroneko expressionlessly watched us.

"Only likes ugly girls?" she whispered. "Hmm..."

A cold satisfaction exuded from her. She then turned her harsh gaze on Kirino.

"Hah. Please make no ridiculous mistake. He is hardly my type. He's so far from my type, that this doesn't even qualify as a bad joke. How could I ever be attracted to a guy who does not have cat ears? Please do not mock me.

This...boy...has no beauty to him. He is extremely plain and he has the face of someone who will not make much of himself in life. He is 100,000,000 light years away from my ideal. ...I will have to turn down your offer."

How cruel... You don't have to go that far...

After that string of abuse at my expense, Kuroneko forcefully turned around.

She quickly walked off and I sighed while watching her receding back.

"...Hahh..."

She had pure white skin and black hair like a Japanese doll. She had red color contacts in her eyes and a sexy mole under the eye.

She wore a frilly gothic lolita outfit.

Her interests were cosplay, anime, video games, and making doujinshi. She seemed emotionless and unsociable. When she opened her mouth, only abuse came out. She was an annoying girl who was extremely difficult to deal with.

But...

“I will come over again sometime.”

At times, she could be pretty cute.

“Sure thing,” I responded in a quiet voice I wasn't sure if she could hear.

I turned back toward the house to find my little sister with her arms still folded.

She stuck out her tongue.

ジャンル:**バトル系魔法少女**

現在第2期が木曜日夕方5時半から放映中

Story

赤星めるは、小学4年生の女の子。ある夜、流れ星に願い事をしていためるの部屋に、小さな隕石が落ちてくる。

どっかーん、ぱりんっ！　割れた隕石から出てきたのは、うさぎみたいなヘンな生き物、『こめっとくん』。

こめっとくんは、なんとプリティスターっていう異星種族（エイリアン）の超戦士であり、魔星物（イーブルスター）っていう悪いやつらをやっつけるために、隕石型の宇宙船に乗って地球までやってきたんだって。

「そうだ！　めるちゃん、きみの力を貸してっ！」

「うんっ、いいよぉ～♪」

そういうことになった。

Character

赤星める（あかぼし・める）

小学四年生の女の子。ぼや～んとした、お気楽で天然な性格。こめっとくんにそそのかされて、地球をまもる魔法少女・星くずういっちメルルになる。

メルル

赤星めるが魔法で変身した姿。彼女が持つ魔法の杖『ブースターロッド』は、斬る、刺す、ビーム等々、多数の攻撃手段を備えたオールマイティな武器。必殺技『メテオインパクト』は、武器の特性を十全に生かした連続攻撃である。

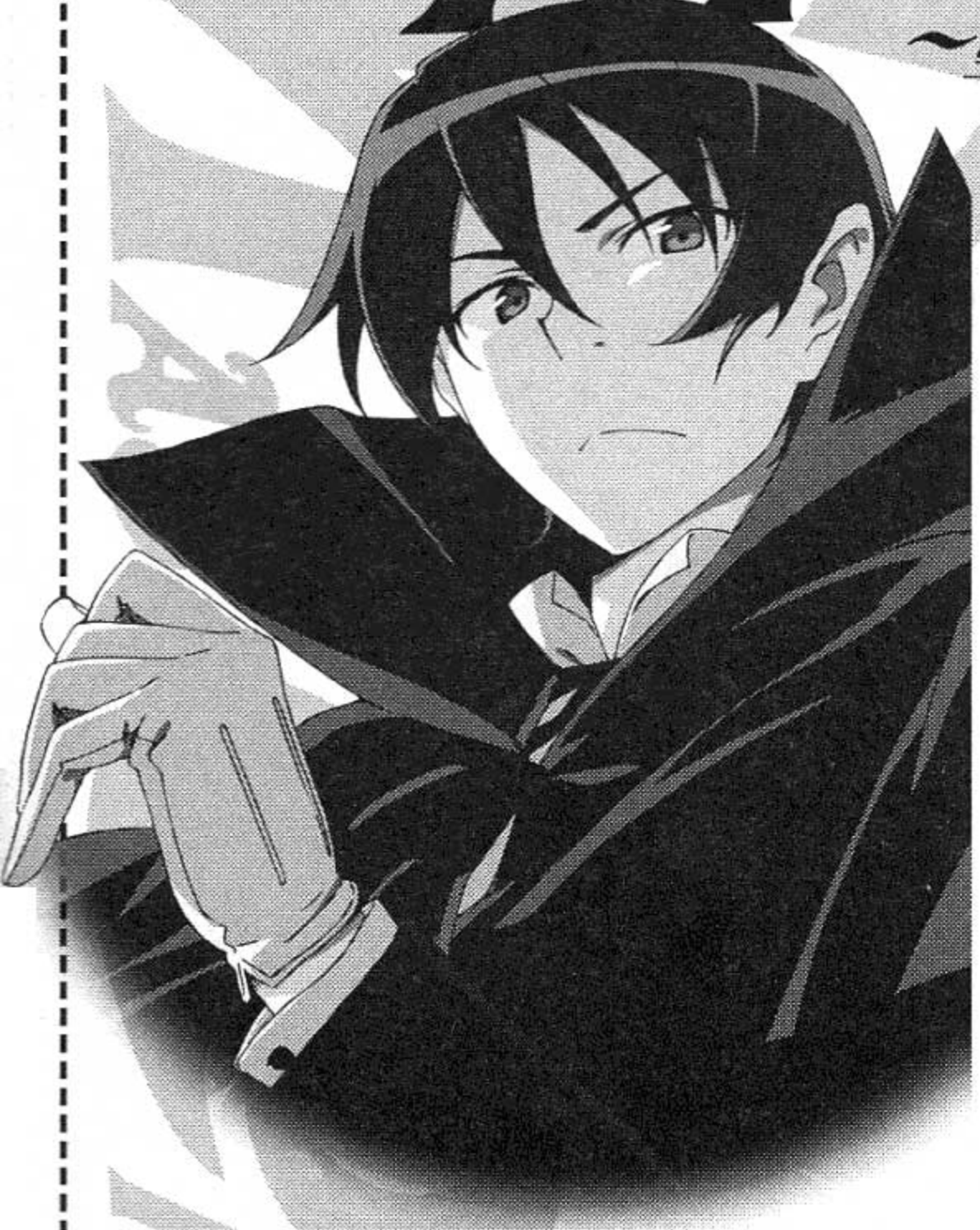
こめっとくん

プリティースターという種族の超戦士。敵対種族『魔星物（イーブルスター）』が地球人の脳髄に寄生し、戦闘準備を整えていることを知った彼は、赤星めるに協力を要請、魔法の力を授け、即席の魔法少女に仕立て上げる。

概要　桐乃が毎週欠かさずチェックしているTVアニメ。魔法少女メルルと、悪の魔法少女『ダークウィッチ』たちとの戦いと友情の物語。キッズ向けアニメながらバトルシーンの作画が神懸かっているのが特徴で、第1期ラストバトルはアニメファンの間で伝説となっている。“大きなお友達”の支持を集めDVDセールスも好調。

anime

MASQUERA
[マスケラ]
～堕天した獣の慟哭～



ジャンル:ダークヒーローサスペンス

現在第2期が木曜日夕方5時半から放映中

STORY

1999年7月、東京上空に巨大な幻影『闇の渦(ダーク・ボルテクス)』が現れた日から、関東圏にて奇怪な事件が多発するようになった。

『悪魔と契約し、特殊能力に目覚めた人間』=『ディアブロ能力者』に、恋人を殺された来栖真夜(くるすしんや)は、『ルシファー』と名乗る悪魔と契約し、自らもまたディアブロ能力者・漆黒(シッコク)となる。

CHARACTER

来栖真夜(くるす・しんや)

本編の主人公。黒髪で細身、黒い服を好んで着用。濁った無気力な瞳が特徴。悪魔ルシファーと契約し、ディアブロ能力者・漆黒となる。

漆黒(シッコク)

来栖真夜がディアブロ能力によって、悪魔ルシファーと融合した姿。仮面に黒衣という風貌、黒い九尾鞭を触手のように自在に操り、黒い獣を使い魔として召喚する。

夜魔の女王(クイーン・オブ・ナイトメア)

事件の黒幕。地獄と現世を繋ぐ門『闇の渦(ダーク・ボルテクス)』を作り出した張本人。黒いドレスを纏う妖艶な美女。その正体は、黒猫の形をした悪魔である。

概要 「メルル」と同時間帯に放映されているTVアニメ。ダークな世界観と媚びないストーリーで、女性層の支持も高い。凝りに凝った設定はときに“オサレ系厨二病アニメ”と揶揄されることも。ちなみに黒猫のコスプレは、この作品に出てくるキャラクター、夜魔の女王(クイーン・オブ・ナイトメア)のものである。

第二章

Chapter 2

"Halloween?"

It was afterschool on a certain Friday in the middle of October.

I was on the way back from school with Manami as usual and, also as usual, was stopping by the Tamura Shop before heading home.

The Tamura Shop was a Japanese confectionary store and Manami's home.

The two of us were walking together, headed there.

"Yes, Halloween. We're going to have a fair starting tomorrow."

As always, Manami had a slightly odd way of pronouncing some words.

She was mentally an old lady, so she had trouble with foreign words like "Halloween".

"Hehh…"

Halloween, hm?

Basically, the Tamura shop was going to have a Halloween fair like the department store in front of the station did.

"You're a Japanese confectionary store, but you're doing something for Halloween? …I'm not sure that'll work."

"Ah, you're making fun of us. We made proper candy for Halloween and everything. I actually called you over to try it out, Kyou-chan."

"Hmm."

"Heh heh. It's pretty good, so look forward to it."

I've done it a few times already, but I guess I should introduce her. This girl with the warm, doting atmosphere is my childhood friend, Tamura Manami. She wears glasses, has a refined appearance, is neither short nor tall, and is on the higher end but not the top when it comes to academics.

Other than her slight airheaded tendencies, she is mostly normal. Her appearance and personality are the

polar opposite of my little sister, so I've gotten along with her fairly well for as long as I've known her. We had never grown apart nor progressed to a lovers' relationship. The relationship I had had with her since we were little kids had simply continued unchanged even in high school.

If anything in my plain, mediocre life was worth a special mention, it was that rare sort of relationship I had with my childhood friend.

Heh, well…My amazing little sister might also be worth mentioning.

As we chatted, the Tamura shop soon came into view.

The Tamura shop was an old, dull Japanese-style building. I had always felt it would fit right in if you placed it within Nikko Edomura.

"Oh, I see. Halloween indeed."

I stopped walking and inspected the different appearance of the shop. The shop front was decorated with plenty of jack-o'-lanterns and ghosts.

It had a contrast of black and orange. I suppose it was what you would call a blending of Japanese and Western.

The wonderful wooden sign had “Tamura Shop” skillfully carved into it. The sign seemed fitting of an old shop, but a department store-like banner hanging next to it and saying “The Tamura Shop Halloween Fair opens tomorrow!” created a very strange and surreal mismatch.

I was a bit worried, so I bluntly asked the question on my mind.

“Will customers actually come to this?”

“Th-they will…! Surely… We are having some events on the opening day.”

“Like what?”

“We are calling in the neighborhood children, showing them how we make our confectionaries, and handing out candy. Also, the clerks will be dressed up as monsters.”

Costumes, hm?

The word “cosplay” that I had learned the other day entered my mind, but I shook my head to get rid of it.

“You said the clerks would be dressing up, but isn’t that just your mom and dad?”

The image that came to my mind was simple and pleasant, but it was just too plain. They were gathering children, so I wondered how well it would work as a sales promotion.

“No, the entire family will be helping out with the shop tomorrow. I will be dressing up, too. I will be a w-witch…”

“A witch!?” I shouted out without thinking.

After all, that was completely different from the image I had of her. If the plain, bespectacled Manami was dressed up as a witch…well, I could only imagine that she would pathetically screw up her magic a lot.

In fact, there was a similar plain, bespectacled magical girl in StardustWitch Meruru (but she had pink hair). According to my sister: “It’s so sad. Her goods are the only ones to never sell out, so they have to package them

with the other regulars…Uuh…" That was exactly how I saw Manami.

As I was reminded of that, a small chuckle escaped my mouth and Manami got both embarrassed and mad.

"Come on, don't be so mean. Don't laugh like that… Y-you aren't imagining something weird, are you?"

"No, I'm not."

As she lightly smacked me with her bag, we circled around to the back door. We entered the house and headed for the living room like usual, but the air seemed to freeze the instant we slid open the door.

"Ohhh….!?"

"Fweehhh…!?"

Manami and I were frozen in place at the entrance to the living room.

This was because Manami's grandfather was collapsed on the tatami mat floor.

"Grandpa!"

Manami's cry brought me back to my senses and I frantically ran over.

Shit! What am I supposed to do…!?

At a loss, I tried to call out to him.

"Gramps, are you okay!? Hey!"

He gave no response and his skin was extremely cold to the touch.

A chill ran down my back. I hesitated for a second and then I tried to find his pulse despite only vaguely remembering how.

…I can't really tell. At the very least, I'm not feeling the pulsation that I normally feel when I check my own pulse.

His body was completely limp, so he felt heavy despite being nothing but skin and bones.

"M-Manami, call an ambulance! Hurry!"

"O-okay! I-I will…!"

Manami was so frantic as she ran off that she almost tripped.

I can't believe a friendly visit has turned into this…

As I became aware of how fragile a thing "everyday life" was, I propped the old man up in my arms. As I did, a pathetic "oof" escaped my mouth.

I could now see his face. His skin was deathly pale and his eyes were open wide.

"…Gramps…"

Grief won out over fear and tears appeared in my eyes. I felt a presence behind me and found Manami's grandmother there when I turned around.

"Oh, Kyou-chan. Welcome," she said with a soft smile that was so similar to Manami's.

"Granny…! Gramps is…!" I shouted out half in tears.

She looked over his body and said, "Oh, dear."

O-oh, dear? Wh-what kind of weak reaction is that!? Does she not understand the gravity of the situation!?

"He's pretending to be dead, isn't he?"

"Ehhhhhh!?"

My eyes opened wide and my gaze quickly shot back and forth between gramps's corpse and her.

Pretending to be dead…? But…he's completely dead here.

"Really? B-but his body is so cold."

"Yes. He was just sitting naked in the store's refrigerator, so I thought he had finally lost it…Sigh. But it seems it was just to pull off this prank. What a troublesome old man."

She never lost her smile, but I was still not convinced.

"B-but he has no pulse!"

"His pulse has always been weak."

"B-but! Then what is this corpse-like smell…?"

"That is simply the scent of the elderly. Kyou-chan, try to think back. He has always smelled like that."

"…You're right!! But still…"

Granny must have realized I wasn't convinced because she put a hand to her cheek with a troubled expression.

"In that case, I will give you some proof," she said before bringing her mouth to the old man's ear.

"Gramps, gramps, if you don't get up soon, I will pull out your hairs one at a time."

"Ooohhhh!"

"Waaaaahhhhh!"

Our reactions were truly dramatic. Gramps jumped up as if he really had come back from the dead and I cried out in fright as the corpse I was holding suddenly sprang to life.

"You monstrous old hag! How dare you mess with my few remaining hairs!" gramps shouted, eyes wide.

H-he really was alive…

I'm the one that should be complaining here, old man! I thought I was going to have a heart attack!

Without listening to a word gramps had to say, granny looked at me and winked as if to say, "See?"

Gramps then spun around to face me with his eyes still wide in the same expression. Needless to say, it gave me yet another fright.

He raised a life-filled hand and said, "Happy Halloween, Kyou-chan! Trick or…what was it?"

"Don't ask me! Has your brain started to rot, old man!?"

Before I knew it, I had shouted back without restraint.

"Th-thank goodness…grandpa is okay…"

After she returned to the living room, Manami was so relieved that she repeated that same statement a few times.

Afterwards, I had chased after her to stop her from calling an ambulance and to explain what had actually happened.

This was after we had returned to the living room from there.

"Ha ha, sorry about that. I guess your grandfather was a little too convincing Teh heh!" said gramps while sticking out his tongue.

Believe me when I say it was difficult to resist punching him.

Don't make your granddaughter cry.

"So gramps… Why were you pretending to be dead?"

"Eh? Oh, I was practicing my Halloween costume for tomorrow. Heh heh. I make a pretty amazing zombie, don't I?"

"Amazing? That was nothing to joke about."

If you make such a realistic corpse in the shop, one of the customers is definitely going to call the cops and an ambulance

! And you'll be coming back to life afterwards, right? The shock would kill the kids you called over.

Also, a zombie is a bad idea for a store that sells food.

"At the very least, I think it would be a bad idea to use that as a performance for the store," I warned.

"…Mh, really?"

Gramps looked utterly disappointed. He glanced over at granny with a look that seemed to say, "What do you think?" She merely said, "Kyou-chan is exactly right," and he looked downhearted.

He finally rolled over into the corner of the room and said, "Oh, I see. Fine then. Hmph, I guess I'm just…"

The old man was pouting like a child.

Granny chuckled and said, "Kyou-chan, don't try to console him, okay? If you act too concerned, he tends to get carried away."

"Roger that."

Granny was normally incredibly kind, but she was quite harsh when it came to gramps.

"A-ah ha ha…" Manami laughed awkwardly as she watched the exchange between her grandparents, but then she stood up as if she had suddenly remembered something.

"Oh, right. Kyou-chan, I am going to go ahead and bring in the Halloween candy, okay?"

"Sure."

"Hee hee. I will lend you a hand with that."

When gramps saw Manami and her grandmother had left the room, he slowly sat up and spoke to me reproachfully.

"Heh! You sure are popular with the old ladies, Kyou-chan!"

"That doesn't make me happy!"

"Ka ka ka!"

Gramps was a fun old man to be around. I had known him since I was a little kid and I liked him almost more as a friend than anything else.

I hoped he and granny would never die.

Meanwhile, someone else entered the room.

“Oh! It’s An-chan!”

“Yup, here I am.”

I raised one hand in greeting to Manami’s little brother , “Rock”.

Rock was an embarrassing nickname he had gotten carried away and given himself a while back and it was also his soul name.

I’d been calling him that for about 2 months at that point, so it had just kind of stuck. If the same thing had happened at his school, I kind of feel sorry for him though.

“…Um…well…Keep up the fight, I guess.”

"You're sympathizing with me the second we meet!? Well, okay! I don't really understand, but I will!"

He had a buzz cut, he was rather short, and he always talked in a ridiculously loud voice that made it sound like he was using a megaphone.

I had always liked how he referred to me as An-chan and…well…he was kind of like a little brother to me.

"By the way, what do you have there?"

I pointed toward the instrument Rock was carrying. I actually knew quite well "what" it was. My question was more about "why" he had it.

"This? Heh hehh… I'm gonna give a performance for the events tomorrow! I guess you could say I'm in charge of the music. Basically, I'm gonna get everyone fired up for Halloween with my live performance! I'll be all like, ' Listen to the sound of my soul!' Hah hah! Pretty badass, right?"

Rock strummed the instrument he was holding.

Leaving aside the issue of whether "Listen to the sound of my soul!" would ever be "badass", a certain question had been stuck in my head ever since he had entered the room.

"But isn't that a shamisen you're holding?"

"Heh. That's An-chan for you. You always attack straight to the heart of the issue." With a distant look in his eyes, Rock let out a heavy self-deprecating breath. He then continued speaking while half in tears. "I'll be honest with you, An-chan. I have no money, so I can't buy a guitar! That's why I bowed down and asked dad to buy me an instrument, any instrument! He said granny played the shamisen, so I should ask her to teach me."

So that's how this came to be. That certainly is a middle schooler-esque reason. But what was his dad thinking? Even if he asked for any instrument at all, a shamisen is a bit out there.

Actually, Rock is quite something himself for agreeing to actually learn how to play the shamisen. I suppose this is a case of like father like son. In fact, does anyone live here who isn't an airhead?

With a huge grin on my face, I asked, “Well? Can you play it? Let me hear.”

“Sure thing! Prepare to be surprised!”

Rock held up the shamisen with such speed that I could almost hear the “shakin” sound effect. He must have been practicing. The pose he took wasn’t bad. It actually looked like something a real guitarist would use.

With a tense expression, Rock proceeded to play the shamisen. It was a truly surreal sight.

O-oh, wow. He’s playing a legit song!

I knew nothing about shamisen music, but I could tell he was intentionally making the tune I could hear rather than simply randomly playing.

It was a kind, melancholic song that made me feel homesick and was somehow reminiscent of the Heian era .

I almost thought I could hear the sound of a flute coming from somewhere.

It was certainly a fitting sound for a Japanese confectionary shop.

However, it was not Halloween-like in the slightest.

"Heh. Whaddya think, An-chan!? I'm like John Frusciante, aren't I?"

"You're like a lute priest."

"Wha-!? That's the same thing gramps said! That really hurts!"

No way! I made the same joke as gramps? That really hurts.

He may have been playing the shamisen, but I could only see him as the Marukome Boy.

"Chehh. You old people with your old tastes just don't understand my youthful soul!"

Rock resumed his refined performance.

"Sorry about the wait~."

With that relaxed announcement, Manami and granny returned.

They were carrying trays of candy and tea.

The living room now contained, Manami, gramps, granny, Rock, and me.

By the way, whenever I came over, that was usually the group I would usually drink tea with, eat snacks with , and chat with.

Manami and granny lined up the contents of the trays on the tea table.

I looked down to inspect the Halloween candies.

“Oh. These are pretty elaborate.”

“Eh heh heh. Aren’t they?” said Manami with a soft smile and I nodded in response.

There were a few different kinds of candy lined up on the tea table, but all of them were Halloween-themed Japanese confectionaries. One of them was a bite sized jack-o’-lantern, but it was actually the type of Japanese confectionary made of red bean paste and colored with nerikiri-an. I don’t know what that type is called, but I’m betting everyone has had one at some point or another. A skilled confectionary artisan can make anything out of

nerikiri-an, so it is often used for decorative confectionaries. By the way, I can tell you from experience that they are incredibly hard to make. Shaping them with a spatula and mold is hard enough, but just making the nerikiri-an itself is hard for an amateur. I may only be at the apprentice level, but I don't think it would be exaggerating to say that's a secret technique of the trade.

Oh, looks like I got a little too worked up in my commentary there. Heh, I guess I can't complain when Kirino does the same.

"H-here, Kyou-chan. Will you try one?"

"Sure. Here goes…"

I grabbed one of the nerikiri jack-o'-lanterns and tossed it into my mouth.

"It's good!"

"Really!?"

Manami's face lit up and she brought her hands together in front of her chest.

I took a sip of tea and said, “Really, really! And there’s actual pumpkin in this! Now that’s attention to detail! And what are these? Seeds?”

“Yes…They’re pumpkin seeds.”

“Oh, so the decorations on the head were the seeds. Wow.”

I was truly impressed.

Also, each jack-o’-lantern had a different expression. That gave them a real handmade feel to them. Other than the jack-o’-lanterns, there were ghosts, witches, bats, black cats, and other Halloween-themed shapes of various colors.

These are all so small and cute. I bet they’ll be received well by the mainly young and female customers of the Tamura Shop . Not only are they intricately decorated, but thought has clearly been put into them.

I looked over at Manami and asked, “Did you make these?”

“E-eh? What makes you think that?”

Well, because you've been doing nothing but ask me for my thoughts on them…

The first thing you did was ask me to try one and you were so happy when I said it was good. Anyone would be able to tell with that loose expression on your face.

Manami embarrassedly fidgeted for a bit, but finally nodded.

"…Yes. I made them. I'm glad you like them."

"…Sure."

Things had gotten oddly awkward, so I started fidgeting too. If Kirino had seen me, I'm sure she would have called me disgusting, but whatever.

While watching us and biting into a dorayaki filled with pumpkin and red bean paste, gramps spoke up.

"You two need to hurry up and get married."

"Cough…!?"

I almost spat out my tea.

"G-grandpa!" shouted Manami in a rare instance of raising her voice, but everyone else was not phased in the slightest.

"They are rare, but that old man sometimes has some good ideas," said granny with a warm smile as she sipped her tea.

It could get a bit troublesome at times, but those two were always trying to get Manami and me together. It had been going on for years, so we were rarely phased by it anymore, but a surprise attack could still get through.

Honestly… I hate this kind of atmosphere…

Manami seemed to be thinking pretty much the same thing, so she decided to leave the living room.

"I've had enough of you two! Ky-Kyou-chan, let's go to my room."

"O-okay," I replied and stood up.

Gramps happily cheered us on with whistles as I left and followed Manami to her room.

We headed down the hallway a bit and walked up a narrow and steep staircase. I was rather fond of how the staircase creaked with each step. I don't know why, but the sound had always had an odd calming effect on me.

The sliding door right at the top of the stairs led to Manami's room.

"W-wait here a second…"

"Sure."

Manami slid the door open a crack and slipped inside.

She must have been cleaning up her room a bit. Putting away porn magazines…would be what I would do in that situation. Manami must have had her own things she didn't want me to see.

She isn't hiding something truly shocking like Kirino, is she ? …Nah.

Come to think of it, it's been quite a while since I've been in her room.

That said, my heart wasn't racing or anything.

After a short bit, the door slid open again and Manami stuck out her head.

"C-come in."

I then set foot in Manami's room.

The room's floor was made up of six tatami mats and it smelled of soft rush and incense. Both the room and the hallway had a large window, so plenty of sun entered the room. The amount of sunlight was almost dazzling and it seemed to warm me, body and soul.

Despite both being girl's rooms, this one had a completely different feel to it than my little sister's. If you imagine an old lady's room, you should get a surprisingly accurate idea of what the room was like.

It had little furniture, making it basically empty. It had a few dressers, a three-sided mirror, and a tea table, but that was really it. Stuffed animals and colorful cushions were lined up in one corner of the room as if they were a last minute addition to make the room seem like a girl's room.

However, the jars of unknown use, the hanging scroll-style calendar, and what looked like a framed

ukiyoe print gave a much stronger impression of an old lady's room.

"Doesn't seem like it's changed much."

"Don't look around like that… It's embarrassing."

What's so embarrassing about those pots or that hanging scroll?

I'll never understand girls…

I sat down in a random spot, stretched out my legs, and got relaxed.

Manami sat down about two fist-lengths away from me.

"U-um, what should we do?" she asked in an oddly hurried tone of voice.

"Since we're in a bedroom, I know what I want to do."

"Ehh!?" Manami seemed utterly shocked. "Y-you mean…!?"

What's she so shocked about?

"I've been staying up late recently, so…yawn…I just want to lie down and get some rest. And I figure this is the perfect opportunity."

"O-oh…"

Manami seemed to have mistaken my meaning somehow, but she sighed in relief once she realized what I had meant.

What did she think I meant? I just don't understand her sometimes…

I flipped over onto my back and said, "By the way, we left our textbooks at school, so no studying."

"I wasn't saying we should…" After staring at me for a bit, a small laugh escaped Manami's mouth. "Yes…let's just relax."

"…Now we're talking."

And so, we relaxed. I don't know about other people, but for us relaxing was just lazing around doing nothing.

"Oh, right. Do you want some tea?"

"Nn…"

We drank some tea.

"……."

"……"

We just sat around.

"…Fwah."

We yawned.

"Come to think of it, don't you have to prepare for Halloween?"

"Yes, but we won't start until after the shop closes."

"Hmm."

"The whole family is going to work hard tonight."

"Then I'll help out."

"Really? There is a lot of manual labor involved, so that would be a lot of help. Grandpa's back has been hurting him lately, so he has been having some trouble. …But are you sure you are up to it? Aren't you tired?"

"I said, I'd do it, so don't try to talk me out of it."

"Thanks. It isn't much, but we'll feed you dinner in exchange."

We chatted.

While we did nothing in particular, time naturally passed.

"……."

We would be preparing for college entrance exams the next year, so you could certainly say we were wasting our time. However, I've always felt that wasting one's time like that is important. My view of life is that excess like that has value.

As I thought about that, I realized that way of thinking may have been why I felt so much sympathy toward the otaku lifestyle.

Pursuing video games, manga, or anime would do nothing to aid society. Those were nothing but unproductive *hobbies* that did nothing but idly eat away all of your precious time.

However, that was exactly why those things had an unquantifiable value and why so many people grew so obsessed with them. That kind of pointless time was not something to be mocked.

"Kyou-chan, what are you thinking about?"

"Nothing really."

"Hmm…"

Manami sipped her tea while loosely sitting in the seiza style.

I looked over at her face for no particular reason.

"Ah, the tea stem is standing up."

"That's amazing."

Yes.

It was not something to be mocked.

A few hours later, Rock and I were helping clean up the shop and set it up for the following day while the women of the Tamura family prepared dinner. After finishing the cleaning, only one job remained.

"Kwoh! Damn, this is heavy…!"

We had to carry bags of ingredients from the back of a truck to the separate refrigerated room out behind the store.

I'm sure anyone who has ever worked at a Japanese confectionary shop would know, but those business-size bags are all extremely heavy.

…My arms are gonna be sore tomorrow.

Manami's father had gladly accepted my offer to help. In fact, his face had lit up when he saw me, so I'm betting he would have had me help even if I hadn't offered. In all the time I'd known him, he had never hesitated to have me work. However, I didn't mind. After all, that way I didn't feel so bad about everything they did for me.

"Last one…hoo…"

I wiped the sweat from my face with the towel hanging around my neck and my heavy breathing was visible in the cold refrigerated room.

When I exited back into the yard, Manami was waiting for me, wearing an apron.

"Thanks for the hard work, Kyou-chan."

"No problem…but man am I ever tired."

"Ah ha ha," Manami laughed. "Kyou-chan, you really helped out a lot today. Thank you so much. I worked hard on dinner, so make sure to eat a lot."

"You can count on it."

"Do you want to eat first? Or would you rather take a bath first?"

"Since you worked so hard on the food, I'll eat first. Wait…what do you mean take a bath?"

"Um…dad and the others said you might as well spend the night. …I-it was dad who said it, not me!"

"You don't need to repeat that. I heard you the first time."

She isn't as bad as Kirino, but she does act weirdly every once in a while…

It took me no time at all to decide what to do.

"I guess I'll spend the night then."

"Eh? R-really?"

"Well, yeah. I'll just call my parents. We don't have school tomorrow, so there shouldn't be a problem."

She had been the one to bring it up, but a magnificent smile stretched across Manami's face when I readily agreed. Her expression softened so much I'm not quite sure how to describe it.

"Heh heh…I'm glad. It really has been a while since you spent the night, Kyou-chan."

"You're right. It has. We used to spend the night at each other's houses all the time, but at some point we stopped. I wonder why."

"Eh? It was because…actually, I'm not sure either."

We looked at each other for a bit. I thought about it, but I simply couldn't come up with an answer.

I guess it's just one of those things with no clear answer. Changes in relationships are often that way.

"Hmm. Could it be that as a high school boy, you are too nervous to spend the night at a girl's house?"

She sounded exactly like some old lady. There wasn't the slightest hint of youth in the words she chose.

"Why would I feel nervous about spending the night at your place?"

"Eh? You don't?"

"Nope."

Why does she look a bit disappointed?

"In fact, I feel more relaxed here than at home."

Because my little sister isn't here.

Hearing that, Manami's disappointed expression completely reversed itself.

"I see," she said with a smile.

"What? Is there something you want to say?"

"No. I was just thinking that that way is better."

As was often the case, I did not quite understand what my childhood friend meant.

As Manami and I headed for the living room, we ran across gramps in the hallway after he had just gotten out of the bath.

"Thanks for the hard work! As a reward, I grant you the right to take a bath with Manami!"

You shut up. And don't hang around your granddaughter while wearing nothing but a towel.

"S-sorry, Kyou-chan… Why does everyone have to say things like that…?"

"Don't worry about it. It's nothing new, so I don't really mind anymore."

For some reason, my attempt to brush that topic aside seemed to slightly annoy Manami.

"Oh, I see. So you don't mind at all," she said while pouting.

At any rate, dinner ended without incident.

Everyone was resting after the meal in their own way.

A variety show was playing on the TV and Rock would laugh uproariously at every joke the comedian made. It didn't take much to make him laugh.

If everyone was like that, being a comedian would be a piece of cake.

As I tried to watch from next to him, I wanted to smack him on the back of the head and tell him to shut up.

However, I couldn't hear the TV because of Rock, so I lost interest. That was when I felt a gaze from the other side.

"?"

I turned around and my eyes met with Manami's as she had been looking at me.

We were looking at each other with the table between us.

"…Jiii~."

While uttering the onomatopoeia, Manami stared at me, looking like she wanted to say something.

"…Wh-what?" I asked while flinching a bit.

But Manami merely continued wordlessly staring at me as if to say, "You know what."

"…Jiii~."

"…"

It was like we were in a staring contest. The first to look away would lose.

However, I had never won that kind of contest.

"……Kh."

In no time at all, I was unable to endure and averted my gaze. And so I lost.

I had known it from the beginning, but she wanted me to tell her something.

Umm…you liked it when I complimented the Halloween candies you made earlier, so you want me to do that again, don't you?

"Oh, by the way…That food was good."

"Eh heh heh. Thanks. I'm glad."

Despite being the one that made me say it, Manami's eyes narrowed happily behind her glasses.

For me, nothing was more embarrassing. And what annoyed me was that Manami seemed to love embarrassing me like that so much she couldn't help herself.

But I enjoyed troubling Manami so much I couldn't help myself, so I guess I'm not really one to talk.

"B-by the way, do you think your dad's about done with his bath?"

"Hm, probably."

I changed the subject and Manami looked up at the clock and brought her finger up to her lips.

As always, she was seated in a perfect seiza style. It was lovely enough to mesmerize you.

Her looks were average, but that aspect of her was most desirable.

"Do you want to go next?" she asked.

"I'm fine going last."

I'd feel bad going before the people who actually live here.

"I don't mind going after you, Kyou-chan," said Manami, encouraging me to go take a bath.

"No, you go first."

"Don't hold back now, Kyou-chan. Go on ahead. Go on."

After we repeated essentially the same exchange a few times, Manami suddenly seemed to realize something.

She clapped her hands together lightly and said, "Then how about this?"

"…Wh-what?"

Minami leaned over, bringing her face in close. With a mischievous expression, she whispered into my ear.

"How about we take a bath together after all?"

"…!?"

I knew she was just kidding and it was a scheme meant to get me embarrassed, but I hate to admit it still shook me to my core.

"Gnn…"

I started biting my lower lip as my heart raced when suddenly Rock turned around from where he lay watching the comedy act on the TV. He still had a grin on his face from laughing at the jokes.

"Hey, hey. What are you two whispering about?"

"Shut up! Just turn around and watch the TV!"

"Ah ha ha. Kyou-chan, you're blushing."

"Kh…!"

I can't believe this. Dammit, Manami. You've gone too far …

She had an odd way of being much more strong and confident when at home than when she was elsewhere.

Keh! Your future husband is only going to learn about this after he marries you and be stuck having you attacking him with embarrassing words day in and day out. He'll probably end up dying of embarrassment.

Hah, but don't think I'm the same person I used to be, Manami. Over the past few months, I caught a nasty disease from my little sister and her friends. You haven't seen the ultimate power I possess when driven into a corner! Now, listen to this!

"Okay, c'mon, Manami. Let's go take that bath!"

"H-hweehhh!?"

The way that triumphant look melted from Manami's reddening face in an instant made my desperate counterattack well worth it.

"A-are you serious?"

"Completely serious! You're the one that talked me into it, so I won't let you back out now!" I announced as I forcefully stood up and clenched my fist.

Seeing that, Rock got worked up too.

"Ohh! Hell yeah, An-chan! That's why you're a true man!"

Yes, yes. I knew you'd understand. After all, you're an idiot.

Having become a man among men, I grabbed towels and changes of clothes for the two of us.

"C'mon, Manami! Let's go! It's time for our bath! I'll show you my Hyper Weapon!"

My inability to stop once I work up some momentum is one of my most severe personality flaws.

"Wah wah…"

Manami's eyes were opened wide, her face was beet red, and she was shaking her hands around.

Hah, that's what you get. I hope you learned your lesson.

However, I may have overdone it. I started to get a bit embarrassed and red in the face myself, so I was considering going ahead and telling her I was just kidding.

However, Manami's lips stopped twitching and started moving with clear intent.

"G-grandma! What do I do!? Kyou-chan wants to take a bath with me!"

"Don't go tell your grandmother!"

When I came back to my senses, I thought I was going to die, but I ended up taking my bath after Manami's dad . And just to be clear, I took this bath alone.

The Tamura family bath was a completely normal bath with a bathtub and an area to wash in.

The bathtub had calamus floating in it. The calamus festival had long since passed, but the Tamura family had a habit of putting all sorts of things in the bathtub as additives to the bathwater.

As such, you naturally learned about that kind of thing by living in that house.

Simply put, the bathtub was filled with calamus water. By putting expensive calamus root in the water, it was supposed to help with back pain and nerve pain.

I was a bit young to need that kind of thing, but I have to admit it smelled so good it felt like the aroma itself was healing my body.

That mix of a refreshing fragrance and the hazy steam was not bad at all.

It may have been a cramped household bath, but it had a nice atmosphere to it.

I started by washing my hair and body and then washed the bubbles off in the shower.

Only then did I finally stick one foot into the calamus water.

"Hot!"

Oh, that's right. I forgot.

This family always turns their bathtub into a pot of boiling water. What is wrong with old-fashioned people…?

I may have been silently cursing them, but I was still hesitant to cool the bath off with some cooler water because of Manami and the *other* old lady who had to take a bath afterwards.

Fine then. I guess I just have to bear with it.

"Hoooottt!"

I plunged shoulder deep into the water with my eyes clenched shut. As the burning feeling on my skin slowly abated, it turned into a nice feeling.

"Haahhh…"

My body was heated to the core. I did enjoy lazing around in a warm bath, but a truly hot bath wasn't bad either. I rested the back of my head on the edge of the bathtub and sighed.

"Now then. What am I going to do about tomorrow?"

Manami had said she was going to help with the Halloween event, so I decided to help too.

I kind of wanted to see it through to the end.

I was looking forward to see what kind of plain witch she would make.

Also, I didn't really mind helping out with the store. Hard, sweaty work like that just seemed to suit me. Taking a hot bath like this after finishing that hard work gave me an irreplaceable feeling of satisfaction. …Heh, sorry I'm such a normal guy.

Well, it looks like this weekend isn't going to be too bad.

"I won't have to see a certain annoying someone's face even once."

A smile naturally leaked out onto my face.

As I continued to pleasantly soak in the bath, I suddenly heard the sound of rustling clothes.

Hm? Is someone in the changing room?

I could see a silhouette through the steam and the frosted glass. Whoever it was seemed to be stripping.

……..Eh? Wha-? Ehhh?

"Wait! D-don't tell me she's actually doing it!"

I started trembling as I stared at the door to the changing room.

Is she an idiot!? Did she actually take that joke seriously!?

Waahh!! What do I do!? I-if this was an eroge, there'd definitely be an event CG here!

I tightly grabbed onto the edge of the bathtub. After all , I wasn't getting excited at the possibility or anything.

A-anyway, I need to put a towel on!

Just as I began to take action, the door to the changing room slid open.

"Yo! I'll wash your back, An-chan!"

"You!?"

I threw the wash basin at the intruder and scored a direct hit on the Marukome Boy.

"Owww!"

Needless to say, it was Rock that took a wash basin to the face.

Hah. Of course it's him. I had a feeling it was going to end this way!

"…Screw you! D-do you…Do you know what you've done!?" I yelled at him.

"A-An-chan, why are you pissed and half in tears!?"

Don't ask me!

After getting out of the bath, I lazed about in the living room for a while longer. After a bit, granny approached me.

"Kyou-chan, I've laid out your futon in the usual room ."

"Oh, thanks."

The "usual room" was the room I had always used when I had slept over in the past. They had excellent hospitality. If she had just left the futon out, I could have laid it out myself.

Both of my own grandmothers had passed away, so that kindness left me with an odd, warm feeling.

"Hmm, is it really that late already?"

I looked up at the clock and discovered that it was almost 10. The Tamura family tended to go to bed early

in the first place and they also had the event at the store the next day. I decided it was about time I headed back to my room.

"I guess I'll be heading to bed," I said.

"Oh, then I will get back to my room, too," said Manami, standing up along with me.

By the way, we were both wearing pajamas. (I was told the ones I was wearing belonged to her father.) Manami had only just gotten out of the bath, so she was not wearing her glasses and her hair was a bit wet.

"Eh heh heh. How long has it been since we were together right before going to bed?"

"Hmm. About four years I think," I replied as we walked down the hall.

Manami headed up the stairs and I followed.

"You look a little unsteady? Are you okay?"

"Hm? Oh, I'm fine. I'm just not wearing my glasses because I just got out of the bath."

"Oh, I see."

She didn't look fine, so I kept myself ready to support her if she fell. However, we made it to the second floor without incident.

The sliding door right in front of us was Manami's room. My room was the third door.

"Well, good night."

"Yeah, good night."

I watched Manami enter her room and then slid open the door to my room.

"Geh…"

My breath immediately caught in my throat. The futon granny had laid out was there. However, there was another one.

Two futons were laid out right next to each other. Basically, it was what is known as a couple's futon.

Wh-what the hell is this!?

"What's wrong?"

"Eh!?"

I spun around to find Manami right behind me.

"Wh-why are you here!?"

"Y-you don't have to get that surprised… For some reason my futon was missing and I saw you still standing out here when I came out into the hall to figure out where it went. …Um, is there something in there?"

"Don't look! Don't look in this room!"

My cries of protest were too late because Manami had already peered past me and into the room.

"…Ehhhhh!?"

Her body stiffened and she pointed at the pair of futons while violently trembling.

"What is that!? Th-that is my futon…isn't it!?"

"…I'm afraid so," I said with a solemn nod.

"Did you lay it out, Kyou-chan!? So that you could sleep next to me!?"

"N-n-n-noo!? What are you saying!? D-don't be silly! Why would I do that!? Make no mistake about this!"

We were so agitated, that we couldn't string together our thoughts properly. We even forgot what had happened just a few minutes ago.

"B-but, but! They're so close together! It's like the futons of newlyweds!"

"C-calm down! W-w-w-we need to calm down and think about this rationally! Yes, yes. After careful thought , this could only have been my doing!"

"Kyou-chan, calm down! You aren't making any sense! "

"Kh…! I never thought the day would come when *you* would be able to call *me* out on that…!"

At any rate, I didn't even need to calm down to realize that it had to have been granny who had laid them out like that.

…That damn old woman. How could she have such a kind expression while telling me she laid out the futons like this!

"…Sigh. Well, let's move your futon back."

"Eh? You're moving it back?"

"Of course I am! Why do you look so surprised!?"

"Well, actually…I'd be fine…with leaving it like this…"

"I'm moving it back."

Ignoring Manami's ominous statement, I started to pick up her futon.

Suddenly, I started hearing pained cries of "Gfoh…!" from behind me.

"Wh-what!?"

I spun around to find gramps crouching in the hallway and holding his heart.

"Th-the futon…The futon…" he was muttering.

Manami frantically ran over to him.

"Grandpa! Are you okay!?"

"Y-yes, I'm fine. No need to worry. When I saw Kyou-chan about to pick up that futon, my trauma from the war kicked in and I almost had a heart attack. That's all."

"……"

What kind of overly specific cause is that? And since when did something happen to you in the war?

And you were hiding and watching us this whole time, weren't you, old man? You wouldn't have been able to appear with such perfect timing otherwise.

So you're in on this, too.

With an exaggerated expression, gramps said, "If you don't leave those futons laid out there, the pumpkin's curse will kill me."

Quit making shit up…

I glared at gramps with narrowed eyes and tried picking the futon up again.

“Ugh!? Gyoeehhhhhhh!?”

…….

I put the futon back down.

Panting heavily, gramps said, “Th-that was a close one . I almost died. I saw granny waving me over from the other side of the Sanzu River.”

“Granny is watching TV downstairs.”

Could it be any more obvious it’s an act?

I could feel the blood vessels in my temple throbbing as I tried picking up the futon once more. When I did, gramps immediately grabbed at his heart.

“Gwaaaaaaaaahhhh! Fohhhhhhhh!?”

“Daaahhhhhhhhhhhh! Fine! I get it, so just give it a rest already!”

"Cough cough…Really?"

Don't look up at me with those puppy-dog eyes, old man. Nothing pisses me off more than when you use the exact same mannerisms as Manami!

I was so overwhelmed, I could only nod. He was clearly only acting, but it looked like an old man like him would actually die if he put on that act much longer.

"Yes, yes. We just have to sleep here, right? It's not like it's that big a deal. …Right?"

When I looked to Manami for agreement, she gave a gentle smile in return.

"Yes, I am fine with it. As long as you are too, Kyou-chan."

That reaction kind of does make it seem like this is no big deal.

Well, I knew you'd give that kind of answer.

But Manami, if you acted that defenseless around any other guy, they'd definitely mistake it for something else.

And so, Manami and I ended up sleeping next to each other in the same room.

Of course, we pulled the futons apart so it wasn't a couple's futon.

"This sort of reminds me of when we were kids," she said.

"Come to think of it, we did sleep next to each other like this when you would sleep over at my place."

"Yes. I never thought we would sleep in the same room at this age, though."

We rolled over so we were facing each other and exchanged bitter smiles.

If we gave granny the benefit of the doubt, it was possible she had laid out the futons as normal.

However, that old man was clearly guilty either way.

Well, it really wasn't a big deal. It would have been a huge problem with any other girl, but luckily, this was

Manami. She was like family to me, so I didn't need to be nervous or think about it too much. Yes, I'm serious.

"We should probably just get to sleep. Good night."

"Nn…Good night, Kyou-chan."

I turned out the lights and shut my eyes. In the silence, all I could hear was the regular ticking of the clock.

A minute passed. Then ten. No, it was probably more than that. Anyway, once I had lost track of how long it had been, I heard a voice.

"Kyou-chan, are you still awake?" whispered Manami.

"…Yeah," I responded.

Silence continued for a short bit.

"Um…I hope we can go to the same college."

C'mon, why do you have to bring that up now? Ha ha.

I almost said that out loud, but I managed to restrain myself.

"So do I," I replied.

I felt there was no need or reason to talk about that then.

And that's why I continued with the pointless talk.

"If we do go to the same college after we graduate from high school…what do you think things will be like?"

It was a very vague question. However, it was something I had thought about constantly.

I didn't really want an answer. It was just a question I felt had no particular meaning.

"Hmm," Manami thought about it for a bit. "I think things will stay pretty much the same."

Her response could be said to be arbitrary, vague, and overly carefree, but that was what made it a very Manami-like answer.

It was most likely exactly the kind of answer I had wanted.

"Maybe so."

When I thought about it, I really did think she might be right. By graduating from high school and entering college, a lot of things would change. However, plenty of things would remain exactly the same.

"Hah. I get the feeling you'll say the exact same thing when we graduate from college."

A slight laugh escaped my mouth. I glanced over and saw Manami blinking in surprise, but she finally smiled back at me.

"Yes…you're probably right. …Maybe I'll never stop saying that."

Whatever kind of future she was imagining, it made her tone very soft.

For some reason, her words left a strong impression with me. They sounded quite reassuring.

…….

We fell silent once more. After a bit, Manami broke the comfortable silence.

"We used to go to each other's houses and spend the night all the time as kids, didn't we?"

"…?"

Didn't we just have this conversation earlier?

"But lately we haven't at all, so…um…"

What is she having so much difficulty saying?

After searching for the right thing to say for a bit, Manami finally just said, "Sorry. It's nothing."

She then pulled her blanket up so it covered her mouth .

While watching her, I said, "Then do you want to come over to my place next time?"

I had recalled that it had been a few years since Manami had been to my house.

Girls had a way of not saying anything even when they wanted something. I had learned that firsthand recently thanks to a certain someone.

That was why I uttered that one phrase I had been unable to say before.

When she heard my question, Manami's eyes opened wide in surprise and she blinked repeatedly. With her mouth still hidden behind the blanket, she nodded.

"Um…Yes. I'd like that."

Her expression was mostly hidden behind the futon, but her gently narrowed eyes were enough for me.

I had only been able to draw out that happy expression from my shy childhood friend thanks to that certain someone I mentioned before. On that point alone, I was thankful.

"Okay, then let's do that at some point."

And that relaxed night continued on.

By the way, let me be very clear about one thing. We may have slept next to each other like that, but nothing like what you're hoping for happened. Sorry about that.

第三章

ore no imouto ga konnani kawaii wake ga nai❸

Chapter 3

It was December 24th. The night when intimate lovers whispered their love to each other. Christmas Eve.

On that night, I visited a love hotel with my little sister .

“Okay, I’m going to go take a shower. …Don’t you dare peek.”

“Why would I peek? Just hurry it up.”

“Hmph,” Kirino snorted before disappearing into the shower room.

“Hmph,” I snorted in return before sitting down on the double bed.

“…Sigh…”

With that rough sigh, I looked around the room restlessly.

Over half of the small room’s area was taken up by the large double bed.

The ceiling light was on, but the room was still dim.

"…"

I hit the switch on the bedside table and a light directly above the bed turned on, brightening the area a bit more. However, it was still not completely bright.

I could hear the sound of running water and smell the scent of soap floating in from the shower.

Kirino didn't seem to have noticed, but the silhouette of the girl taking a shower was vaguely visible through the frosted glass. Both the dim lighting and the frosted glass were meant to add to the obscene atmosphere of the place.

"…"

The instant I realized the secret of the frosted glass, I quickly averted my gaze.

Against my wishes, my legs stared fidgeting restlessly.

"……What am I so nervous about?"

This is bad. This is really bad. C'mon, Kyousuke, calm down . This is your little sister, remember?

"I know…I know, but…"

The fidgeting of my legs worsened and I could feel a heat rising in my face.

I was unable to withstand idly sitting there, so I searched for something to draw my attention.

I found a TV remote on the bedside table. I hit the power button and the LCD TV in one corner of the room turned on.

However…

"Oh, shit…!"

I quickly turned the TV back off.

Why is it showing a porn video!?

I frantically looked over toward the shower room, but luckily Kirino did not seem to have heard.

I held my hand up to my chest as I sighed in relief.

If she had thought I was watching porn while she was taking a shower, who knows what she would have said to me. That was a close one.

But come to think of it, this is a hotel for doing that kind of thing, isn't it?

And for some reason, I was there with my little sister.

"Ahhhh! What am I supposed to do…?"

I scratched at my chest as I cried out in anguish. My heart was pounding.

I can't believe I have to be somewhere like this with my sister…

The sound of the shower continued and steam floated into the room. There was also the sweet smell of soap.

"…….How did things end up like this?"

To explain that, we have to go a good bit back in time.

It happened just after December began.

As before, I was being forced to play against my sister in a computer game while in her room.

It was a 3D fighting game called “True Little Sister Great Massacre Siscalypse”. Kirino and I were using different computers to play the game. Kirino was on her desktop while I was using her laptop. We were facing each other online. This meant there was no real reason for me to be in her room, but…

“You aren’t allowed to take the laptop out of my room because you would just search for porn sites.”

Saying that, she gave me no choice in the matter. If only she would forget about that already. Well, anyway, while we were playing, she suddenly spoke up.

“Y’know…I have another one,” Kirino said while sending a chain of attacks down on me from the sky. The character Kirino was using (a magical girl little sister) fired countless rings of light that temporarily bound my character so it could not move.

“Huh? What are you tal-…Hey, don’t send out a surprise attack right after speaking to me!”

"Hah? It's your fault for not paying attention. Oh, you died. Ha, you really suck at this."

A grin appeared on Kirino's face as she turned my character into ash with a flashy special attack.

"You need to quit using those overpowered hidden characters!"

"What's wrong with using something the game lets you use?"

Wow, that's exactly the kind of things people say at the arcade that make everyone hate them.

After making various insults regarding my skill, Kirino suddenly seemed to remember something.

"Oh, right. About what I said…"

"Like I was saying before, what are you talking about?"

Can you not just say things plainly?

"I have another life consultation to ask you about."

"…"

H-here it comes…

My spirit practically crumbled inside, but can anyone really blame me? So many terrible things had happened to me due to the turmoil that always began with those words.

"…So do you want me to tell you what it's about?"

If you think I look like I do, you need to go get your eyes checked. Is that something you should be asking as the one asking the favor?

And what's with that barely-suppressed laugh? It's creepy.

I was incredibly reluctant to ask, but I knew she would get mad if I didn't.

"Sigh…Tell me."

"What kind of attitude is that? If you want me to tell you, then act a little more courteously."

"You're worried about *my* attitude!? If you want me to help you, how about *you* act a little more courteously!?

Give me a break!" I clicked my tongue for show. "And how exactly do you suggest I act courteously anyway?"

"Bow down."

"Why does the one being asked the favor have to bow down!?"

I don't understand! Is your life consultation a divine oracle or something?

"Hurry up and bow down."

"Like hell I will!"

I fell silent in anger, but Kirino must have really wanted to talk about what she was consulting me about because she told me without waiting for me to bow down to her.

"Fine then, I'll do you a favor today and tell you. You should be thankful.

What's with that pompous tone of voice?

My little sister then began telling me about the topic of her life consultation.

I had a feeling it was not going to be good news for me .

"Wait, what did you just say?"

"Are you not even listening? The cell phone novel I wrote is getting published!"

……..

So what would you do if your little sister all of a sudden started telling you crazy things?

I frowned and stared at Kirino who was barely suppressing a grin.

"You don't believe me, do you?" she said.

"No, not really."

What kind of horrible mistake would lead to that rape novel of yours being distributed to the public? And according to Kuroneko, the writing itself was shit too.

I wasn't too knowledgeable about how all that worked , but I doubted getting published was that easy.

"I can't really believe it either, but I guess this kind of thing happens when you have as much talent as I do~!"

Yes, yes. Shut up, shut up.

I couldn't see how it could possibly be true, but I felt a bit uneasy because my sister was not the type to say things without basis.

Also, even though I clearly did not believe her, Kirino' s calm did not crumble.

She folded her arms and looked down on me with an expression that seemed to say, "You just don't understand anything, do you?"

"You want me to tell you how this happened, don't you?"

"You're right. Tell me."

I really didn't, but she would have gotten mad if I hadn't asked.

"Ehhh~? Well, I guess I have to then."

Kirino pulled out her cell phone and started tapping on the keys. After a bit, she triumphantly handed it to me .

"Take a look at this site."

"O-okay…"

The cell phone site displayed seemed to be called Cell Phone i-Club. The most eye-catching part of the site was that name displayed in large characters. The site had an overall colorful and fanciful design. Below the title, various menus were listed.

Just like when I had first looked at that walkthrough wiki, there were too many things to choose from and I had no idea what to do. It was quite a bit more complicated than just checking the forecast on your phone.

"Heh, well? Do you understand now?"

"No. Where am I supposed to look?"

"Hahhhh? Let me see that!"

Kirino peered over at the cell phone from and operated it while pressing up against me.

"H-hey, don't get so close," I complained.

Our arms were pressed right up against each other. A sweet scent caught my attention.

I swore to myself that I wasn't a siscon. My reasoning was that this had nothing to do with her being my sister.

But in the next instant, I realized that wasn't the way I had thought about the issue just a few months before.

However, in yet another instant, Kirino's elbow jabbed me in the gut. This sent that realization sinking back down to the depths of my mind.

"Here! Press this link to the library!"

"I-is this publication information what you wanted me to see?"

"No, look below that at the monthly rankings."

"Oh, here?"

I lined the cursor up on the indicated area and finally saw what Kirino wanted me to see.

How was I supposed to find this when you just handed me the cell phone at the top of the site, you idiot?

"That shows the monthly popularity rankings for the cell phone novels submitted to this site."

"Submitted?"

Seeing my confused expression, Kirino's mouth twisted in irritation.

"Sigh…Do you even know what this site is for?"

No, but why do you seem so shocked by that fact?

God, you piss me off!

"I guess I have to explain that as well. …What a pain."

She listlessly brushed back her hair. She always made sure all of her little actions were so seductive.

Tch. I don't really care.

However, I had little choice but to hear her out. If I cut her off partway, she would just get mad.

And so she explained it to me.

According to her, Cell Phone i-Club was a site that allowed people to easily create their own webpages on their cell phones. Those webpages could either be used for a blog or as a message board on which to interact with other people.

"So it's kind of like the social network you signed up with before?"

"I guess it's sort of similar. Things are called blogs or social networks or whatever, but the differences between them are often rather vague."

"I see…"

As usual, I gave an arbitrary response because I didn't really understand.

"Originally, the different sites had more originality in what they did, but lately blog sites have been adding more social networking type functions. Popular services like WebClap and Twitter are being copied by everyone,

so sites have gotten so cluttered and generic. It just makes you wonder why you wouldn't just use the more well known one, y'know? Anyway~," said Kirino getting back to the subject at hand. "This Cell Phone i-Club lets you write and submit cell phone novels."

Apparently, the novels were the main draw of that site . You could put your cell phone novel on the webpage you created and submit them to be entered in popularity polls held by the site.

The monthly popularity rankings Kirino had mentioned before were the results of those polls.

"And so the especially popular cell phone novels on Cell Phone i-Club get published."

"Hehh…"

I had heard of such things happening on the news, but it was the first time I had ever actually learned of a novel getting published that way.

Basically, cell phone novels aren't written by professionals.

Well, the authors of ones that get published did receive money, so maybe you could call them professionals, but let's not split hairs over definitions.

When you really think about it, what that Cell Phone i-Club site did was lure in amateurs with the possibility of getting their cell phone novel published. It was actually a pretty good method.

Hmm, now things are starting to add up. But…wait…

"S-so the novel you wrote was…?"

"Yes! It got 1st in the monthly rankings!"

"Really!? That rape novel did!?"

"Really, really! Eheh. Isn't it amazing♪ Kyaaahh~~!!"

Kirino let out a high-pitched squeal and then put her hands on her cheeks and squirmed embarrassedly.

It looked a lot like when she was putting on an act, but this time I'm fairly certain that was honestly how she felt.

She must have been truly happy indeed to let her guard down that much in front of me.

She even didn't seem to mind that I had let the term " rape novel" slip in my surprise.

To be frank, I just couldn't believe there were readers who interested in *that* novel.

I can't believe it. If I told Kuroneko, she'd probably die of shock. If she found out that novel she criticized so heavily was popular enough to get published, her worldview would probably crumble.

However, I had not actually read Kirino's cell phone novel.

That said, I had no interest in reading a story my little sister had thought up. Especially after having just hearing a vague outline had made me want to kill her.

"Isn't it actually quite something to get your very first novel published?" I asked her.

"Eh? Ehh~? I don't really know all that much about this kind of thing, so I don't know~! Is it? I guess that just

goes to show how great my talent is! Maybe I should apologize to all those big-headed wannabes who have been submitting novels for quite a while now~~♪"

God, you're annoying.

Kirino was even more annoying than usual.

I only found this out later, but "wannabe" was a term used to mock the authors who wanted to get published but did not make it. The way she was talking pissed me off and I wasn't even trying to get published, so I'm willing to bet the "wannabes" she referred to would have wanted to kill her had they heard her. Much like Kuroneko had before.

"There must have been a lot of kind people for your novel to get published."

"Hm? Oh, no, no. It's getting published, but it's a bit different from normal."

"Ahn?"

"It isn't getting published for being #1 in the rankings this month."

"Then why is it?"

"Go get me a snack and a drink."

"That sentence has nothing to do with this conversation!"

Don't suddenly change the subject just to order me around!

And why am I only complaining inwardly while I head over to the refrigerator?

In her usual place on the couch, my little sister started speaking while drinking the cola I had gotten for her.

"Now back to how my cell phone novel got published."

According to Kirino, cases of novels getting published due to getting first in the monthly rankings on Cell Phone i-Club were more or less nonexistent.

That alone did not mean a novel was popular enough.

Instead of the monthly rankings, the requirement for getting published was…

"Getting over a million page views seems to be the standard for getting published."

"Page views?"

"It's how many times the cell phone novel was read."

"I-I see… So you need over a million people to read it!?"

"No, you don't have to go quite that far. If the same person reads it twice, the view count goes up both times. Think of it like an internet access counter. You need a million hits total over *every page* of the novel."

In other words, if someone read a 100 page novel all the way to the end, that would count as 100 views.

And so the one million page views referred to it being read one million *times*, not by one million people.

"But even so, a million is still a huge number. I mean, even if the novel is 100 pages, people aren't necessarily

going to read all the way to the end, right? If they don't like it, they'll quit reading."

"True. The really popular cell phone novels tend to surpass a million views in about 3 months. After that is when Cell Phone i-Club contacts them. And of course, not every novel that makes it past a million views gets published."

So basically, a novel the site managers did not think would sell would never get published no matter how many views it got. They were a business, so that should come as no surprise.

"That's quite a hurdle…"

Since my sister had suddenly come out saying she was getting published, I had been a bit mistaken about the process.

Not just anyone could get their cell phone novel published like I had originally assumed.

Although I suppose that kind of thinking was unfair to those who had worked to get published.

"That really is a strict requirement."

"Yeah."

"By the way, how many page views does your novel have?"

"About 350,000. And it's only been a month since I submitted it."

"I see…"

Wow. At that rate, she might actually make a million by three months…

"But that isn't even close to a million."

"I know. That's why I was so surprised when they contacted me…Heh heh." With a huge grin on her face, Kirino munched on the cookies I had gotten for her. " Yesterday, I got an email from an editor who had read my novel."

"Eh? But Kirino…isn't this a little too good to be true?"

And what exactly is an editor?

I only knew that they were someone who worked for the publisher.

"Possibly."

I had thought she would be mad at me for ruining her excitement, but Kirino seemed to receive my comment calmly.

"The editor wants to meet me to discuss the details."

"Is this editor a man or a woman?"

"Probably a man."

"He might be lying about being an editor. If he's some creep, that could be dangerous."

It may have been unfair to all the editors in the world, but that job title just left me with a suspicious impression .

Also, cell phone novels were mostly written by school girls and the possibility of having one's cell phone novel published would make for juicy bait, so it was possible someone would try to pick up girls by pretending to be an editor. I folded my arms with a sour look on my face as Kirino studied my expression.

"Ohh? What, are you worried about me?"

"D-don't be ridiculous. Why would I be worried about *you*?"

I turned the other way and Kirino let out on oddly gleeful laugh.

"Kya ha ha! Well, you are a siscon after all. God, you're creepy."

"I already told you I'm not! Just give that a rest already!"

Dammit, is she ever going to let that go?

Kirino let out a ridiculing laugh with an extremely nasty look on her face.

"Fine, fine. Never mind that then. Anyway, what are you gonna do? If you want to come with me, I'll take you along."'

"……Kh."

I see. So this is what the life consultation is really about.

Basically, she was afraid to meet the man claiming to be an editor on her own, so she wanted me to go with her .

Sigh…

If she would only ask *me, I would have no choice but to go along. I'm not a monster after all. But not with that attitude of hers. If I say I'll go, it'll look like I'm volunteering out of worry for her!*

Why would I go!? Are you an idiot!? Surely you can come up with a better way of asking!

With that counterattack prepared, I asked her an extremely nasty question.

"…Hm. By the way, what'll you do if I don't go?"

"I'll go on my own."

"Are you stupid!? Take mom!"

"No. Mom can't keep secrets, so she'd definitely tell dad. When I started secretly modeling, he found out from her in no time at all."

I see…

It was true that that old woman couldn't keep a secret. In fact, Kirino had it easy. She had told everyone in the neighborhood about the first porn magazine I ever bought. Do you have any idea how it feels to come home from elementary school and see your mother talking to the lady next door and waving the June issue of Cream in her right hand?

Well, enough about my trauma.

"So you want to keep your cell phone novel a secret from mom and dad?"

"Well, yeah. Dad would probably be against it."

She had a point.

"If it gets published, that's going to involve money. You can't keep that a secret from our parents."

"I know, but I want to keep it a secret up until the very last second."

Apparently, Kirino intended to wait until her publication was set in stone and then be with her editor

while she informed our parents. Laying down the groundwork and getting someone who was on her side was probably a fairly good strategy. She must have learned what worked when she had to convince our parents to let her work as a model.

"So I can't tell mom. If you don't come, I'll go on my own."

"…I see."

I almost told her to just do so, but I suddenly imagined the scene of my little sister going on her own.

If you ignored her personality, she was pretty good looking… And if she was somewhere with a lot of people like Tokyo, she would probably have guys hitting on her. Lastly, if this so-called editor turned out to be a bad guy, there was only so much a middle school girl could resist no matter how reliable she was.

I wasn't really worried about her, but when she asked me so directly it did bother me a bit.

Tch. Looks like I have no choice.

"…Fine. I'll go with you."

"Hah? What's with that reluctant expression? If you don't ask me properly, I won't take you with me."

"Please take me with you!"

Now I just sound desperate! God, if someone calls me a siscon now, I'm not sure I can argue back!

I really wasn't one though.

And the next thing I knew, it was Sunday.

My little sister and I were on our way to a publisher in Shinjuku. We left the west exit of Shinjuku Station, headed on foot in the direction of the Metropolitan Government Office, and circled clockwise halfway around Shinjuku Central Park. We arrived at a tall building with shiny black windows. Apparently, the publisher was located within that building.

I was surprised at how many huge buildings there were in Shinjuku. There were tons of people and the layout of the station had been incredibly complex. It almost felt an underground labyrinth.

I checked the time on my cell phone and breathed a sigh of relief.

"We made it in time. Just barely."

"Hmph. We would've gotten here in plenty of time if you hadn't gotten us lost. Now I don't even have time to touch up my makeup. What am I supposed to do?"

Kirino was dressed up in a much more mature look than usual. Well, she normally dressed up fairly maturely, but this seemed like a different kind of mature.

With an ocher pantsuit and a liberal amount of makeup, her outfit seemed like that of a working adult. It was a much more formal way of dressing up.

"This is the first time we've been here, so of course we're not going to perfectly know how to get there."

Really it was that map's fault. An eight minute walk from the station? How fast are they assuming people are walking?

Part of it was due to getting a bit lost in the station, but it had taken us over 15 minutes.

I silently cursed the map I had printed out from the publisher's official site.

"So were you supposed to meet in the lobby?"

"Yes. At 4:30. …You wait here."

"…Hm? You don't need me to go in with you?"

"Don't be stupid. After going to all the effort of dressing up with this formal fashion, do you really think I would waste it all by being with someone dressed like you? You need to stay away from me."

But didn't you have me come with you because you were afraid to meet this guy alone?

I don't know if she read my doubts from my expression, but Kirino pressed her mouth shut and remained silent for a bit.

She finally opened her mouth and said, "You don't have to come with me…but stay nearby. If I send a blank email, come right away."

"Will do."

I decided I might as well do what she said.

"Okay, I'm going."

"Sure. I'll be waiting here."

Kirino lightly raised one hand and entered the lobby. The automatic door opened and closed.

I moved over to the pillar at the side of the entrance so as not to be in the way and waited. I held my cell phone in one hand in case Kirino sent an SOS.

Hmm, was there really any reason for me to come along?

Just as I thought that, Kirino exited along with a slender man wearing a suit.

"Oh."

I wasn't doing anything wrong, but I still hid behind the pillar.

My cell phone then started to vibrate.

"!"

I tensed up, assuming that she had already sent an SOS, but that turned out not to be the case.

"We're going elsewhere. Follow us."

"…Fine, fine."

I was impressed that she could casually type out an email while walking like that. I certainly wouldn't have been able to do it.

Hmm, I guess they aren't going to have the discussion in the editorial department.

I tailed Kirino and the man from a short distance away . After crossing a nearby intersection, they headed due south for a bit and finally entered a café.

"Now, what am I to do?"

I wondered if I should head in, too. Before I could make up my mind, my cell phone started to vibrate again .

"!! Oh…It's just a normal email."

Because of the instructions she had given me before leaving, every incoming email made me jump. I kept thinking something bad had happened to her.

Okay, what does this say? "Wait there"? Fine, fine…

I sighed as I looked up at the evening sun. I ended up waiting outside the café for just under an hour.

When Kirino exited the café alone, the sun had already set and darkness had set in.

She was grinning happily. It was clear things had gone well.

I raised one hand to wave my little sister over.

"Hey, finally done, are you?"

"…Huh? Are you still here?"

"Ha ha. You say some horrible things, don't you?"

Are you still here?

Are you still here!?

That's horrible! I can't believe people are allowed to say things that horrible!!

I wasted my day off to go all the way to Shinjuku with you and waited for an hour thinking an SOS could come at any second! Is that any way to treat your brother after he did all that for you!?

"Why are you tearing up? Oh, were you *that* worried about me?"

"Not in the slightest! Why would I be worried about you!?" I shouted and turned around.

I took a few steps away as if to leave Kirino behind and then…

Now, let's see if she regrets that comment.

I turned around.

"Why are you getting in a taxi!?"

"Eh? I was given money to take the taxi back to the station."

Don't look so surprised at my reaction! And I was asking why you were so naturally just leaving me behind! …Well, whatever. My words would be wasted on you.

Incidentally, the area had a surprising number of taxis passing through. That was likely because there were enough customers for them, but that fact had left me dangerously close to the horrifying experience of turning around to find my sister completely gone.

After a short argument, Kirino and I headed for the station in the taxi.

We spoke in the backseat on the way.

"Well? How'd it go?"

Was that editor someone you can trust?

Kirino enthusiastically replied, "He said I was exactly what they were looking for! And he said I was a good representative of girls these days! And so I would be able to get the readers invested in the story! He just kept praising me!"

"…I see."

That wasn't what I had meant, but whatever. From the look of her, he at least wasn't some dangerous guy. But just to be sure, I asked another question.

"What kind of person was he?"

"Hmm." Kirino brought her finger to her lower lip as she thought. "He seemed like a really serious person. I guess you could say he had the feel of an elite businessman. He had really good manners. Oh, and I asked all sorts of questions about the editorial department and he answer all of them without hesitation . And most importantly, he gave good constructive criticism of my cell phone novel. Nothing like what I was worried about happened."

"…"

I hadn't really been worried, but I was still glad that the guy had turned out to be legit.

It was true that he had seemed like he was on the level. I had only seen him from behind, but the nice suit he had been wearing had made him seem like a proper member of society.

"Heh heh. And he was pretty good looing."

What does that have to do with anything? That's the problem with girls… They judge everyone by their appearance.

I frowned and fell silent.

"What are you upset about?" Kirino asked. "Oh, and I got this."

She held the man's business card out toward me. I took it and gave it a thorough inspection.

Apparently, he was Kumagai Ryuunosuke of MediAscii Works Second Editorial Department Mobile Publication Division.

Below his name, the publisher's phone number was printed and below that what was most likely his personal cell number and email address were written in pen. Next to those, he had written "<– Use these", so those must have been the best way to contact him.

"Kumagai-san, hm?"

"I've gotten business cards from publishers in my modeling work before, and they were all like this."

"I wasn't saying it was fake. …Well? What about your novel getting published?"

I couldn't stand my sister's boastful tone of voice, so I changed the subject.

And Kirino did not seem to mind.

"Oh, right. About that. He wants me to write a new novel. We talked about it a lot, but he said the current one wouldn't catch the eyes of the readers well enough. Anyway, he wants me to narrow down the target audience. Apparently, if I write a story while thinking about what the readers would want, it'll be a lot more popular. He said if I write something good, it'll get published."

"…Are you actually going to go through with that?"

I had a few concerns.

"Yeah. After coming this far, why wouldn't I?"

I was pretty sure nothing I said would change her mind, but I decided to voice my concerns anyway.

"It's your decision, so I won't stop you and I don't feel right ruining your excitement. But do you really have time for that?"

My little sister was the ace of the track team, a teen magazine model, a student with some of the top grades in the prefecture, and even an otaku who had recently made her Comiket debut.

That was what I meant when I asked if she had time.

I had recently heard my mom bragging once again about everything she was doing.

She was doing really well in track and her work, but those things had a way of getting especially time consuming at the end of the year.

Also, I was fairly certain she had said some game she had preordered in Akihabara came out at the end of the year. Knowing her, she would definitely work to finish it as soon as possible. With everything she did, I had already wondered where she found the time, and now she was planning to add writing a cell phone novel on top of it all.

"That's true. I'll probably be pretty busy."

Kirino herself must have had the same concern. She folded her arms and stuck out her lower lip as she thought. She held out one hand and started muttering as she counted on her fingers.

Not long after beginning, she simply said, "Well, I'm sure I'll manage somehow. Who do you think I am?"

"I see. Well, that's your problem," I said carelessly.

I thought I felt an odd proud feeling, but I must have been imagining it.

"Yes, it is. It's none of your business. Oh, by the way. Before long, I need to go to Shibuya to collect data. You're coming with me because you were of no help today."

Fine, fine.

It wasn't even worth getting mad anymore. No matter what I said, it wouldn't help.

Once she said something, she wouldn't listen.

I resigned myself to the fact that she would get her way.

Time passed and December 24th seemed to come in no time at all.

As usual, I was walking to school with Manami.

"Hey, Kyou-chan. …Are you free today?"

"Ahn?"

I glanced over and saw her usual soft smile.

"We're having a Christmas party at our place tonight. We're making sekihan and cake. So…if you like…"

"I'll pass. I already have plans."

"Gaaaaan."

Manami's mouth fell open in shock.

She dropped her bag and her jaw trembled.

"Wh-wh-what plans do you have?"

"What's with that over-the-top reaction?"

"I-it isn't. It isn't over the top…"

It was. She was way more shocked than usual.

"…U-um…Who…do you have plans with?"

Hearing her quiet voice, I fell silent.

For a few seconds, I considered whether I should tell her or not, but I finally turned away and said, "It's none of your business."

"Fweehh….Uuhh…"

Don't get so upset.

It's not like I can tell you that my Christmas Eve plans are to…

"…go to Shibuya with my little sister? Really?"

"Did you say something?"

"No," I quickly responded to my sister's threatening question.

My plans were to go to Shibuya with Kirino in order to collect data for her cell phone novel.

We exited the station and headed toward the intersection in front of 109. Someone was using a van with speakers attached to annoyingly shout about god or something.

The sunset dyed the sky and night would set in soon. Once it did, we would likely be able to appreciate the illuminations decorating the area more.

As usual, Kirino was decked out in her model fashion and she perfectly blended into her surroundings as if she were truly in her element. The area was filled with people like Kirino.

The crowd in front of the station had reminded me of Akiba and Comiket, but the clothes and faces of the people in the crowds had been completely different.

Everyone was extremely stylishly dressed and the odds of passing someone good looking were much higher than usual.

It was enough that my sister did not even stand out.

Mhh…It's so much that my clothes seem plain in comparison….

"Tch. You're wondering why I chose Christmas Eve, aren't you? I didn't want to, but the novel I'm going to write has a lot of scenes on Christmas Eve. Due to that and the deadline, today was the only option. As much as it pained me, I even refused Ayase's invitation. Normally , I would be at the Christmas party being held by the office she works for."

Kirino simply would not shut up.

You don't have to act so much like you're doing me a favor. If it wasn't for this, I would be at the Tamura family Christmas party like usual.

You should be thanking me for coming here instead.

"Hey, are you even listening? Do you really understand what I just told you?"

"Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. I get it."

"Hah. Don't act so conceited. It's creepy."

"I said I understood! You're the one not listening!"

First Kirino then Ayase then Kuroneko and even Saori. Why can't middle school girls listen to what people tell them? They need to learn from a certain plain glasses girl!

"Well? What does this data collection entail?"

I understood the general idea, but I had no idea what it actually involved.

Since we had simply been walking around, I was beginning to doubt there had been any point in my coming. As I gave my sister a questioning look, she was simply muttering while looking at her memo pad.

"Kirino?"

"I heard you. I'm trying to bring it all together, so be quiet. Okay, first let's…"

Apparently, the memo pad Kirino was looking at had a general outline of the plot of the cell phone novel she was going to write.

Kirino looked back and forth between the memo pad and the Shibuya street before pointing at the intersection ahead of us. It was a famous intersection often seen in dramas and the like. The light happened to be green, so a large number of people were crossing.

"Let's start there."

"The Shibuya scramble crossing, hm?"

I had no idea what kind of story Kirino planned to write, but apparently a scene was going to occur there.

"So what's going to happen at the scramble?"

"We're starting with the prologue. The middle school girl who's the protagonist is on a date with her boyfriend on Christmas Eve."

"Hah?"

"Do I have to explain everything? I can write the novel more realistically if we simulate the actions of the characters."

"I see. So that's what you meant by 'collecting data'. I take it you'll be the protagonist while I'll be the boyfriend."

"I don't like it, but yes."

I finally understood why she had brought me along. I had never written a novel, but apparently actually seeing the things was best. In that case, I could help out.

I was once more impressed at how seriously she took things when she put her mind to it.

She had gone so far as to ruin her Christmas plans for it.

She was the same way with the track team, with studying, with her modeling work, with eroges…and, it seemed, with cell phone novels.

"Okay, got it. So what's first? Are we going to walk across holding hands?"

"Well, first I need you to get hit by a dump truck."

"The boyfriend gets turned to mincemeat at the very beginning!?"

What kind of gory novel is this!?

"Don't be so disgusting. Shocking the readers with a tragedy at the beginning is standard in love stories."

"Don't act like you know what you're talking about. Oh, and I'm not going to do that!"

"Ehh? Sigh… Already you're being selfish. We're supposed to be doing this according to the plot I've written. If you don't actually do it, I can't get any real data."

"But why do you need to simulate the fate of the mincemeat boyfriend!? What kind of data are you hoping to get from your brother's splattered corpse!?"

As I shouted at her, Kirino held out one hand like a psychometer aiding the police.

"A clue as to who did it?"

"You did it!"

So the boyfriend really dies at the beginning of your new novel? That's a bit of a downer isn't it…?

"Just so you know, cell phone novel readers want this kind of thing."

Really? Where is all that confidence coming from anyway?

It sounds more like the prologue to a horror novel to me…

"Fine, I guess it *would* be a problem if you were put out of commission at the very beginning. I'll just take some pictures here."

Saying that, Kirino starting snapping photos of the intersection with her cell phone camera.

Oh, she looks like she's taking this seriously.

"That's enough for here. Let's head to the next place."

Next, we headed into 109. When I saw a concert stage being constructed at the entrance, I was reminded that it was Christmas Eve.

For anyone that doesn't know, 109 is a building in Shibuya filled with all sorts of stores selling women's clothes that are popular with the youth.

I only knew this because Kirino explained it to me.

The area the building covered was not that large, but it had 8 floors and 2 basements, so it was packed full of Shibuya-style girls. It was the first time I had been inside it, but I still strongly felt like I did not belong there. I thought I felt unwelcome gazes, but I may have been imagining that. The odds of seeing a beautiful girl in there were even higher than outside in Shibuya. Slender girls only a step away from being on the level of an actress and girls with too much makeup were all over the place. It was quite a sight. Oh, and I also smelled a strangely sweet aroma that seemed familiar. I soon realized it was the same scent my little sister's room had.

"First, let's head up and look at the clothes."

"Okay, okay."

I gathered up my courage and continued on in. While looking at clothes, we moved up floor after floor on the escalators.

"Wow, all the clothes here are amazing. Who would ever wear that sexy see-through miniskirt that mannequin is wearing?" I commented.

Stores were also selling clothes that looked like something Marilyn Monroe would wear, clothes that looked like something from an idol performance, and other clothes that only a really good looking girl would be able to wear without being embarrassed. It was possible actual women in the entertainment business bought clothes there.

"You don't have to give a running commentary. If you keep your mouth shut, maybe no one will realize you're some hick, but really you should just head back to Chiba. "

"You live there too! You need to apologize to everyone that lives in Chiba!"

We went up another floor on the escalators and reached a floor selling clothes that were more on the cute

end of things. The clothes there seemed more childish and I could actually imagine normal girls wearing them. Some of the prices were even in the 5000 yen range.

Hmm…

"Why are you staring at that mannequin like that? Don't tell me you're planning to buy that."

"No, I was just thinking that none of these clothes would look too good on Manami…"

"Hm, I wouldn't say that. Especially the ones on this floor. They're not as showy as the ones on other floors."

Kirino usually only insulted Manami, but now she was defending her. Since fashion was one of her specialties, she must have merely naturally given her honest opinion . And to be honest, I had been thinking the clothes on that floor might actually work with Manami.

But then Kirino touched the waist of the mannequin as a thin, mischievous smile appeared on her face.

"But all the clothes around here are pretty narrow around the waist. Could she really wear them?"

"Probably not…"

Manami had a way of getting a bit plump around the waist from the beginning of fall to the end of winter.

"I thought not. Kya ha ha! All those Japanese confectioneries have made her into the plain girl deluxe!"

"Don't make fun of people's looks! You'd get mad if someone said you had a round face for a model, wouldn't you!?"

Kirino's laughter completely disappeared and she slapped me with a monstrous look on her face.

"Oww!"

O-ohh… I guess she's a bit sensitive about that…

After we had finished making our rounds of the eighth floor, we headed to the basement.

We skipped passed the first basement and down to the second.

"So do we just have to walk around here to get the data you need?"

"More or less, but this is our real destination."

Kirino lumbered on, leading me to an accessory shop named Samantha McBee. It was filled with dazzling displays of earrings, rings, and other accessories. I picked up a few and they were mostly in the 2000-3000 yen range, so they were reasonably priced. Since the area was popular with the youth, 109 had plenty of surprisingly cheap things.

"So what kind of scene is supposed to happen here?"

"The main character goes here on a date with her boyfriend," muttered Kirino bluntly.

"Her boyfriend? But wasn't he just turned to mincemeat?"

"Obviously, it's a different boyfriend. This takes place a month after her previous boyfriend dies."

Hmm… One month, huh?

"What's with that look? Do you have something to say ?"

"No, it's just that isn't that a bit quick to get a new boyfriend after the previous one died?"

And the girl's in middle school. How much of a slut is she?

"That's normal. I don't see the problem."

"How can you not? Won't this make the readers mad? I know I wouldn't want to read something with such a heartless protagonist."

"You just don't understand. That's the guy way of thinking about it. To me, it looks like she's working hard to get back on her feet, not heartless."

"Is that so?"

I decided not to say anything more about that. After all , I would never be able to understand how middle school girls thought. It was Kirino's story, so she could do whatever she wanted.

"So buy me an accessory."

"Hah? Wh-what? …What did you just say?"

That had come out of nowhere, so I thought I had misheard, but Kirino clicked her tongue.

"In the scene, the boyfriend buys her an accessory, so you need to buy one for me."

"…!!"

You heard that, right!? That's the kind of crap she pulls! I had never thought she would try to get money out of me in the name of gathering data.

I glanced over at my sister's face only to find a mocking expression.

"Ohh? What's this? Can you not even afford something like that? I can't believe it. You're really throwing a wrench in my plans…"

She always just said whatever she wanted.

From an onlooker's perspective, I looked like a broke boyfriend who couldn't afford a present on Christmas Eve.

Uuhh… I can't stand having everyone staring at me like that. It's like lying on a bed of nails…

"…What do you want me to buy?" I said in resignation.

"I chose what I wanted when I was here before. I want this limited Christmas edition silver ring & accessory set. Isn't it cute?"

As Kirino had already chosen what she wanted, she immediately pointed toward a showcase.

Mh…Well, I guess I can manage that. Actually, it's pretty cheap.

"Kh. Okay, okay. …Excuse me."

I reluctantly called over a saleswoman, but soon regretted having done so.

The text on the price tag had been so small, that I had missed one of the zeros.

Th-thirty thousand!? It thought it said three thousand!

Trying to look as cool as possible, I wiped sweat from my brow and said, “Your brother only has 18,000 yen on him. Kirino-chan, could I borrow a bit of money?”

But when I turned around, my little sister was gone.

What? Damn her! She realized what was going on and ran off!

“Sorry about the wait, sir. That would make an excellent gift for your girlfriend.”

“Umm, actually, never mind! Ha ha ha!”

I gave the saleswoman an obsequious laugh and hurriedly left.

“I can’t believe you! Why don’t you have enough money!? I just can’t believe you!”

“Shut up! It’s your fault for choosing something so expensive!”

Kirino and I were arguing as we exited 109.

I wanted to believe that I was merely imagining the occasional snickers coming from the crowd around us.

"Sigh… God, now I'll be too embarrassed to ever go back to that shop. And I didn't even get any data for the scene where the boyfriend buys her an accessory," sulked Kirino.

The way she spoke was rather cute, but I wasn't about to let that fool me. She was definitely cursing me inside.

"Calm down and think about this for a second. I'm a normal high school boy. I don't carry around that much money. Wouldn't it be the same for this boyfriend?"

"No. He's already a proper member of society and has lots of money. Hmph. If I made a guy as poor and lame as you her boyfriend, the readers would stop reading right there."

Should you really be saying that about your brother?

I decided to go with a sarcastic counter attack.

"Oh, I see. Well, sorry about…wait just a second."

"What?"

"This guy's a proper member of society and he's dating a middle school girl!?"

"Is that a problem? He's the young president of a startup company."

I believe that is what you call a lolicon! He's clearly some kind of creep!

I really wanted to yell that out, but my sister was likely to get mad if I complained about her story, so I tried to be a little more roundabout.

"Isn't it bad to have a middle school girl with an adult boyfriend?"

"That's completely normal, you idiot. It's pretty standard for these kinds of things."

Really? Really!? Sorry, but I can't see how that could possibly be normal. Maybe this is what they meant when they said shoujo manga was getting a bit extreme of late…

Kirino must have seen the worry on my face because she went on to explain her thinking.

"I really have to explain everything to you, don't I? Girls my age are suckers for stories about older boyfriends. After all, the boys at our schools are all a bunch of immature brats. We'd rather date a monkey from the zoo than one of them."

"…"

Is that how the girls in my class view me?

I wish she hadn't told me that…

"In my personal opinion, a love interest needs to be at least in the second year of high school. Anything below that is out of the question."

"…I see."

I let out a heavy sigh.

I felt sorry for the boys from her school that had a crush on her.

Although I was pretty sure she would be too much for any boy her age to handle.

Actually, she would probably be too much to handle for any guy.

If anyone actually started dating her, he'd either have to have a kind personality on the level of Buddha or he'd have to be a masochist.

"But what am I going to do now? Thanks to you, I can't write the scene where her boyfriend buys her an accessory at '09."

As Kirino muttered, she started writing in her memo pad with a pen. She may have been changing the flow of events.

"Oh, I know. I can have it happen the same way. I can just have a scene where her boyfriend doesn't have any money."

"What, so did he lose his wallet or something?"

"No, I wouldn't write anything that clichéd. I'm going to use the scene for a date with a different poor boyfriend .

"A different…poor…boyfriend? What happened to the lolicon president?"

Oh, crap. In my surprise, I used the nickname I had given him. Sorry, sorry.

Kirino then explained the fate of the lolicon president.

"His wife and company find out he was cheating with a middle school girl and he is utterly ruined."

"It was adultery!?"

That lolicon is even worse than I thought! Why couldn't he be the one you killed off!?

"So after all the drama this causes, the boyfriend returns to his beloved wife. After being so harshly abandoned, the main character is terribly hurt…and she …stops trusting guys… Uuhh…Don't you feel sorry for her?"

Um, no? It was her own fault.

The one I felt sorry for was the wife. She was simply too kind. She really shouldn't have forgiven him. I know that's what Mino Monta would say.

And if your husband cheated on you with a middle school girl, wouldn't you normally divorce him and sue for damages?

My heart had gone cold, but Kirino continued her explanation.

"And then the main character is so hurt she falls into despair and joins a prostitution group. Y'know, schoolgirl prostitution."

"Wow, what a slut."

I had been unable to resist letting my true thoughts slip out, but can you really blame me?

I mean, what kind of horrible development is that? Could anyone really like a protagonist that was that much of a bitch?

"What did you just say!?"

"Nothing, nothing!"

As my sister glared at me with fangs bared, I put on a fake smile.

Wow, that was scary…

"Fine then," said Kirino as she glared at me. "And so she has a new boyfriend starting in the next scene."

"She sure goes through them fast. S-so, does this one die or fall to his ruin as well?"

"No! This one stays till the end. After all, the theme of the book is pure love."

"…P-pure love?"

What the hell did she just say?

I was utterly confused.

"That's right! Pure love!"

Kirino puffed her chest out proudly. She held no doubts about what she had just said.

From what she had said, apparently repeatedly switching out boyfriends, dating a married man, and prostituting oneself counted as true love as long the girl stuck with one guy at the very end. I really don't want to believe that was normal for cell phone novels and the mainstream way of thinking for middle school girls. Wh-what do you think?

Surely she really meant sullied love, right?

After finishing up at 109, we entered Shibuya Center Street.

As we were approaching the area near Sakuraya, Kirino said, "That's one of my favorite shops. Its silver accessories are both cheap and have a nice style, so they're perfect for a gift for a high school or middle school girlfriend."

"Are you still insisting I buy you an accessory?"

"Of course. The poor boyfriend may not have much money, but he has a really good fashion sense. He says '

sorry I couldn't buy you an expensive accessory' and then takes the main character to this shop. Isn't that so cool?"

Kirino was proudly praising the boyfriend she had thought up.

While inwardly irritated, I said the line my sister wanted as kindly as I could manage.

"Sorry I couldn't buy you an expensive accessory."

"God, you're annoying!"

"Why!? That's just unfair!"

It hadn't been easy for me to say such an embarrassing line.

Kirino gave an extremely displeased face.

"For some reason, it sounds really creepy when you say it. I wonder why…"

Don't look so puzzled! How long are you going to keep up the attack!?

While continuing to complain, I ended up buying her a 10,000 yen pair of earrings!

By the time we left the shop, it was getting dark. It was midwinter, so the nights were extremely cold.

The breath of passersby was visible even when they were wearing face masks.

We headed straight down Center Street.

We turned left at an arbitrary corner and exited out on a larger road. After another right turn, we walked on for a bit until Don Quixote and Tokyu finally came into view . Kirino pointed forward.

“The next scene happens there. Well, actually this scene happens later, but since we’re here, we might as well do it now.”

“Okay, okay. What do we have to do now?”

“First, I’ll run toward Tokyu, okay?”

“Okay.”

"But the light will be red, so a car will come roaring toward me, okay?"

"O-okay…"

"And then you'll push me out of the way and get hit in my place."

"Your boyfriends sure get hit by cars a lot!"

"You don't actually have to get hit. After you knock me to safety, you can jump out of the way of the car."

"I'm not performing any acrobatics!"

"Oh, and this will give you amnesia."

"Your cell phone novel certainly has plenty of clichés!"

If she went through each and every one of them like that, it might actually end up being something original.

All my shouting back at her had left me out of breath and Kirino shrugged and sighed.

"You've been doing nothing but complaining. I thought you were here to help?"

"I'm willing to help, but I'm not willing to die. And what kind of story is this anyway? Is a scene like that really necessary? Let me see that memo pad."

"…Fine."

Kirino must have been a bit embarrassed to have me see her story because her cheeks reddened a bit.

I took the memo pad and read through the plot written across a few pages.

"Okay, let's see."

Characters:

Main Character (Her name is Rino. A first year middle school girl. A standard level of cute. <– About half as cute as me.)

About half as cute as me!? What kind of self-praising memo is this? What kind of author uses her own looks as a standard for the characters? A-and…

"Rino? You used part of your *own* name for the protagonist?"

"Is that a problem? I did it because it's easier to write the character if I can empathize with her to a certain extent."

"I guess it isn't a problem, but just the other day you were complaining about how creepy it was for Kuroneko to project herself onto the protagonist of her doujinshi. Isn't that the pot calling the kettle black?"

"It's okay when I do it."

She didn't hesitate to say that! That's the kind of person my little sister is!

The character description for Rino continued.

(She has an extremely pure personality. She views romance as extremely important and is easily hurt. She has a super cute little sister.)

Wait, I thought she was a bitch and a whore? She was supposed to be pure?

Honestly, I can never understand how she feels about things …

Her personal tastes were also evident in the "super cute little sister".

(The little sister's name is Shiori-chan.)

And the sister's name came from an eroge.

Boyfriend 1 (His name is Tetsu. Suddenly gets hit by a dump truck and dies. Can be a bit rough, but is occasionally very kind. *It is his first time dating a girl, so he isn't sure how to treat one. <– Isn't that cute?)

Boyfriend 2 (His name is Kazu. 32 years old. The young president of a start-up company. Actually has a wife and kids. His company and wife find out about his infidelity and he abandons the main character. He is socially ruined. Suicide maybe? Really good at sex. The suit moe type. Hangs around with the main character for fun, but occasionally gets really serious. Seems like a true adult man. Isn't the main character cool for manipulating a grown man?)

From the “occasionally gets really serious” part, I could only see him as a lolicon.

It was amazing how the protagonist’s boyfriends kept dying. It went beyond just being a downer.

Boyfriend 3 (His name is Toshi. The one she sticks with in the end. A super hot guy. His family is actually rich, but he’s poor because he doesn’t want to rely on his family. A second year high schooler. Works as a model for Men’s Non-No. <– The money from his job all goes to his band. Sings the vocals for a band. Can also play the guitar. Blond. His grades are the top of his year. Also the captain of the soccer team.)

I couldn’t stand the sound of that guy. He was like a male Kirino.

Really, really kind and worries about her a lot. He loves the main character, but he refuses to admit it.

He goes all out on everything and doesn’t give up no matter how hard things get.

“…”

I frowned and read on. After the character introductions was an outline of the plot. In the prologue, her boyfriend gets hit by a dump truck. Then she catches the lolicon president who then abandons her, and she falls into despair and starts whoring herself. That much she had already told me. After that, Rino meets someone new while sulking. That someone was Toshi. He was kind, cool, and perfect in every way. He scolds Rino and has her quit being a prostitute and helps her out in various other ways as well.

Rino had become distrusting of guys, so she does not trust him at first. In fact, she originally speaks harshly to him and tries to distance herself from him. However, Toshi is very patient and sticks with her. Due to the way her previous boyfriends kept dying or falling to their ruin, Rino was rumored to be cursed, but Toshi did not care. After they grow closer, he finds the people spreading the rumors about her and gets mad at them for her.

Ridiculous. No guy would go that far for a girl like that.

Reading the summary had made me rather angry. I wonder why that was.

Anyway, the summary continued on from there. However, I've had enough of interpreting it, so I'll just give it verbatim.

Rino opens her closed heart and starts dating Toshi. She quits the schoolgirl prostitution and starts taking life seriously once more.

But one day, Toshi is hit by a car and loses all his memories.

It happened because he was protecting Rino, so Toshi comes to love Rino all over again.

With his precious memories still gone, the story continues for the two.

But one day, Rino is raped. Even so, Toshi continues to love her, consoles her, and supports her.

But one day, Toshi gets leukemia. Because Toshi is hospitalized, Rino gets lonely and cheats on him. (<– Toshi's best friend tempted her. He had always loved Rino and decided to make himself happy after what had happened to Toshi. <– This makes drama with a love triangle.)

It was a horrible story. A truly horrible story. Just reading the summary was sapping my energy.

How hard a life does this Toshi have to have?

When Toshi learns of his best friend's betrayal, he tries to back out of the love triangle himself. However, Rino really truly loves Toshi more, so she says she wants to be with him even if he is sick. Toshi's best friend that Rino betrayed dies in a bike crash that night .

"Hey, Kirino, have you decided on a title yet?"

"No, not yet. All I know is it's definitely going to have 'little sister' in it somewhere."

"The little sister hasn't shown up at all outside of the character introductions!"

"I'm going to put her in as a really, really important character later!"

Oh, I see. I say the title should be "The Girl that Brings Catastrophe".

Rino clearly brought death and misfortune with her. All of the characters in the story let their feelings at the time rule their actions.

Sigh… At this rate, I hate to think what kind of sad ending this has…

Rino and Toshi break down crying. They remain together to the end of his limited remaining time.

What? So the boyfriend dies and it ends? Isn't that a little-

In the end, the power of love blows away the sickness or whatever to give them a happy ending.

"What the hell?"

I almost tripped!

"What? Do you have a problem with the plot I came up with?"

"Yes, with that last line! Even if I kindly overlook the rest of the story, I can't let that ending go! You clearly got fed up with writing it properly and threw that in there to end it! You need to think this through to the end!"

"I haaaaavvveee! You just don't understand. Readers these days want a happy ending!"

"That doesn't excuse this! I know nothing about this stuff and even I can tell this is bad!"

"It's fine! It only looks bad in the summary. In the full text, it'll seem completely natural! After all, plenty of eroge viewed as masterpieces use that ending! It's a standard in the tear-jerker eroge to have it look like the poor heroine is going to die and then have her come back to life in a flash of light! I'm just using that technique for a cell phone novel! Do you understand now?"

"…"

Where the hell does all that confidence come from!? Fine, just do whatever the hell you want!

I understand now why Kuroneko wanted to kill you!

As we argued, we continued to walk. We passed by Tokyu and headed toward Maruyama. When we turned from the main street to an alley, the area started to get more and more seedy.

Specifically, the walls and shutters had obscene graffiti spray painted on them and indecent hotels dotted the area. I started to wonder where we were headed.

Suddenly, I heard a voice ahead.

"Up through #B100 may now enter. Please do so in an orderly fashion."

A long line came into view.

At first, I was reminded of Comiket, but something like that would never be held in Shibuya.

The line seemed to be heading into a live music club.

I see. So that's where she intends to gather data next.

"Okay, I understand now that you have thought this plot through."

But there was still one thing that had been bothering me. I couldn't help but ask her.

"Kirino…About this guy...Toshi."

"What?"

"Why does he go so far for such a bitch?"

My theory was that he was a masochist.

"That's…"

Kirino almost replied immediately, but she suddenly stopped for some reason. She mumbled, thought for a bit , and finally responded with a frown.

"That's because he loves her."

"Keh."

Ugh. I can't believe her.

After heading toward Maruyama, we entered a live music club to see a performance by a popular rock band called Shiva. Apparently, the band would be the model for the band Toshi and his best friend were in, so Kirino seemed to be trying to burn it all into her memory. I just thought the place was too loud. It really wasn't my kind of place.

Just as with Summer Comiket, I never wanted to go back. Just being there really wore me out.

Hoo…I guess this might've been one of the reasons she made sure we went on Christmas Eve.

So far, everything had gone rather well. I was utterly exhausted from being dragged around by my little sister, but it also seemed that nothing worse could possibly happen. I completely forgot the lessons I had learned when we met Ayase on the way back from Summer Comiket or when our parents found out about Kirino's hobby.

Of course, my optimism was without basis.

Something was soon going to happen that would shock me to my core.

After the performance ended, we exited the club.

"Okay," Kirino said as she suddenly headed for a nearby convenience store as if she had just had an idea.

"…Where's she going?"

I stuck my hands in my pockets and watched her. She soon exited the convenience store holding a bucket filled with water. She was lugging the heavy bucket my way.

It seemed she had borrowed the bucket from the clerk.

"Hey, Kirino. What's the bucket for?"

I don't see why she would need to pour any water around here…

"Don't tell me you're going to dump it on me."

"Of course not."

I-I see. Good. I guess not even she would do something like that.

Just as I was breathing a sigh of relief, I heard a loud splash.

"Wha-…?"

The splash had come from…

"What the hell are you doing!?" I shouted, wide-eyed in shock.

My sister was soaking wet. Her hair was plastered to her face and cold drops of water were dripping from her clothes. It was a terrible sight to behold.

The splash had come from Kirino dumping the bucket of water on herself.

"…"

Soaking wet, Kirino ignored my voice and the gazes of those around her, walked over to the wall of the club, and sat down.

With her arms hugging her legs, Kirino shivered. Her heavy breathing was visible in the cold.

The weather was cold in December and the sun had set , so the temperature had to have dropped quite a bit.

Also, the water itself had to have been quite cold.

All the guests leaving the club were standing in shock at Kirino's sudden action.

I don't get it! Why would she do that!?

My thoughts were in complete chaos, but I only hesitated for an instant.

"Y-you idiot! I'll go buy you a towel."

"Not yet."

"Ahhn!?"

I spun back around and bared my fangs without trying to hide my irritation.

I was of course shocked by my sister's sudden action, but my anger was greater.

I didn't know why she had done it, but I couldn't believe she would do something like that in front of her brother.

The response my stupid sister gave me while shivering was quite a shock.

"I-I need to know how the main character would feel …so wait a bit longer."

"No! Are you a complete moron!?" I shouted back reflexively.

I had still not comprehended what she had said.

What? What did she just say? She needs to know how the main character would feel…?

"What are you talking about? Wait…don't tell me this is part of the data you need!"

You're soaking wet and shivering in the cold! I don't get it! I can see your breath in the air. Please, stop this! I can't bear to watch it! God…

"On Christmas Eve, Rino gets soaked by the rain and waits for her ex-boyfriend even though she knows he isn' t coming. So…I need to do this…"

"I don't care! Just put this on!"

I took off my jacket and put it over my seated sister's shoulders against her will.

I then glared at the onlookers to drive them off. Luckily, the anger in my eyes was enough to drive them back. That reduced the number of quizzical looks and scornful smiles turned in Kirino's direction.

"Now I just need to get you a towel… Let's see…"

I ran over to the convenience store and quickly bought a towel.

When I returned, I placed it over my sister's head and forcibly dried her off.

"H-hey! Where do you think you're touching me!?"

"I'm drying you off!"

Don't keep talking to me like that at a time like this.

I guessed her wet clothes had likely robbed her body of quite a bit of heat, so she was likely to catch a cold. My first thought was to find a nearby public bath.

As I was trying to put together a plan while completely flustered, Kirino pulled on my sleeve.

"I-I'm cold…" she complained with a blue face.

"Of course you are!"

You're the one that dumped a bucket of water over your head! You idiot!

Do you never think of the consequences of your actions!? There's a limit to how serious you can get about this kind of thing!

Those clothes you went to so much trouble of dressing up in are ruined…

"This is the scene where Rino first meets Toshi… As Rino sits here soaking wet from the rain…Toshi exits the club and spots her. I was thinking that would be the best way to do it…"

"…Tch."

She had said all sorts of crazy things like having a character get hit by a dump truck or a character losing

his memories, but she seemed to have been serious about it all.

She had gone so far as to put her own body on the line for it.

Being able to stick with something to that extent may have been praiseworthy, but I simply could not understand it.

I could only be utterly shocked.

I mean, it's a bit creepy, don't you think?

"H-hey…"

"Ahn? I'm trying to figure out what to do, so wait just a-…What?"

"Th-the next place I need to get data from is…there."

"A-are you still going on about that…?"

Kirino was stubbornly pointing in one direction, so I looked over that way while utterly dumbfounded.

"Wh-wh-what!?"

I was so shocked at what I saw, that I almost bit my tongue. When I looked up at the blue building Kirino was pointing at, I lost any remaining hint of calm.

As some people might know, the area we were in was also known as the love hotel district.

"A-are you stupid!? Why do I have to go somewhere like that with my sister!?"

"D-don't call me your sister so loudly! …Achoo! When Toshi finds Rino soaking wet in the rain, it's only natural for them to head to a love hotel. Th-there's nowhere else around here to take a shower…Achoo!"

"Gnnnhhhh….! A-a-aaaaaaaarrrrrrrrrgggggggghhhh!"

I shouldn't have come! I shouldn't have gone to Shibuya with my little sister!

And so we now reach the point I started with at the beginning of the chapter. Do you understand now how I ended up sitting on a love hotel bed waiting as my little

sister took a shower? By the way, due to it being Christmas Eve, the love hotels were packed full. It had been hard to find an open room.

"Sigh… I give up…"

When I calmed down and thought about it, I realized it truly was strange how much effort Kirino was putting into this data collection.

And then another thought entered my head.

Wait. When the main character in her cell phone novel finishes taking her shower…they aren't just going to check out …are they?

H-how far is she going to go in simulating this?

"….Ah."

Gyaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh!

Why did I have to imagine something as disgusting as that! ? Oh, god. That was horrible. I have to be some kind of idiot. She would never do that!

As I listened to the sound of the shower, I felt an awkwardness that I cannot really put into words.

How long is she going to spend in the shower! Just finish up already!

Suddenly, I heard a beeping noise and the cell phone in my back pocket started to vibrate.

"Oh."

That made me jump. Who's calling me?

The LCD display said Tamura Manami.

I had been so overcome in awkwardness that the phone call seemed like a form of rescue.

"Hey, what's going on?"

"Ah, Kyou-chan? Thank goodness you answered…"

"Huh? What, did you try to call me before?"

"Y-yes. Sorry about being so persistent."

"I don't mind. It's my fault for not noticing anyway. So what do you want?"

"U-um…well…"

What a strange girl. Why is she so nervous about talking to me?

"What?"

"U-umm…Kyou-chan? Are you done with the plans you said you had at school today?"

"No, not yet."

It was hard to say I was in Shibuya with my sister, so I gave a vague answer.

"…I see," replied Manami. "When…do you think you will be done?"

"I don't know exactly, but I plan to be back by 9:30."

My parents had said they were headed out somewhere . My mom had likely invited my dad on a Christmas date

. Anyway, another reason Kirino had chosen today for this was likely because we could get away with breaking our curfew.

I don't see any other reason why she would choose Christmas Eve as the time to spend with her hated brother.

"H-hmm…"

"What is it?" I replied.

"I-I made enough cake for you, Kyou-chan. Do you think…you could stop by my house…on your way back from what you are doing?"

Her voice grew quieter and quieter as she continued.

"If I have time, I will."

"Really? Thanks."

Why are you thanking me? Isn't that backwards?

Manami hesitated and said, "U-um…" a few times before saying, "Ky-Kyou-chan…by any chance…are you with…another g-girl…?"

"…"

Oh, I get it. There's been a misunderstanding. Actually, I should've realized it sooner! So that's why she's been acting so weird! Shit…How am I supposed to respond?

I couldn't exactly say I was with my little sister in a Shibuya love hotel. If I did, an even worse misunderstanding would occur before I could fully explain the situation. I was unsure what to say.

"Wh-why aren't you saying anything?"

Whoops. If I don't say anything, she's going to jump to the wrong conclusion.

I had no choice but to tell the truth just without the parts that would create misunderstandings.

"No, I'm with my sister."

"You're sister? Kirino-chan?"

"Yeah."

"S-so you're on a Christmas date with Kirino-chan?"

I hated the way she had put that, but given what we had done, she wasn't too far off.

"I wouldn't call it a date. We just went shopping and saw a band perform."

"Isn't that called a date?"

Shut up. This still isn't a date.

"But I get it now. If that's what you're doing, have fun with Kirino-chan."

Manami seemed to have accepted my answer, so I breathed a sigh of relief.

And then I heard the bathroom door slide open.

"Hoo. That was one refreshing shower. So nice and warm. Hey, the lights in love hotel bathrooms shine like a rainbow! I didn't know that!"

Dammit, Kirino! Why did you have to say that now of all times!?

"Ky-Ky-Ky-Ky-Kyou-chan? Where are you and Kirino-chan…?"

"Ahh!! I think I'm losing the signal!"

I hung up and turned off my cell phone.

While panting and sweating, I gave an audible gulp.

Shit, did she realize where we were? From that last comment , it really sounded like she had…

I had merely hung up because I hadn't been able to come up with an excuse.

"Sigh…"

I felt depressed when I tried to think about how to deal with the misunderstanding that had likely just occurred.

This is bad. Really bad. What kind of brother goes to a love hotel with his little sister on Christmas Eve?

And it isn't even a misunderstanding! God dammit!

As I held my head in anguish, Kirino spoke to me.

"What? Who were you on the phone with?"

"Shut up! It's all your fault! How could you do that!? Now my childhood friend is going to have the wrong idea! It's all over!"

"What are you talking about? I'm not sure what your problem is," said Kirino as the scent of soap filled the room. "But can't you just quick load and choose a different option?"

"This isn't an eroge!"

Kh. If only I had that option!

Wait…

"Wh-what the hell are you wearing?"

I had been looking down and about to cry, but I froze the instant I looked up. This was because Kirino was standing there in a bathrobe.

"Y-you disgust me. Don't look at me with those lustful eyes. I had no choice. My clothes aren't dry yet. In fact, why aren't you using the blow dryer to dry them?"

"Oh, I see. Sorry for not thinking of that," I said sarcastically.

I took the blow dryer Kirino had just been using and started drying her wet clothes.

Why do I have to dry off my sister's camisole while she spouts abuse at me?

"Heh. Don't tell me you were aroused by seeing your little sister in a bathrobe. That's the problem with siscons. They're just so creepy and disgusting."

"You are the last person I want to hear that from!"

In more ways than one!

Ignoring my retort, Kirino turned around and started wandering around the room in her bathrobe. She opened and closed the drawers and flipped through the pamphlets on the bedside table while typing with one hand on her cell phone. She also occasionally snapped pictures with her cell phone camera.

"Wh-what are you doing?"

"Gathering data."

You're still doing that? I guess she was serious when she gave that as a reason to come here.

She was being very thorough. Her enthusiasm was a bit creepy to watch.

As Kirino continued to wander around the room and take notes, she opened one of the pamphlets.

"Given the plot of my new novel, I'm gonna need some prostitution scenes, aren't I?"

"…Y-yeah. So?"

"How about we call in one of these call girls? I need some data on that kind of thing."

"Do you *want* me to punch you!?"

Dammit. How does she keep finding new ways to surprise me?

Just to be clear, we did not actually call one.

After that, we left the love hotel and walked through the city at night, heading for the station.

I thought over the events of the day.

We had gone shopping in Shibuya, seen a band perform, and gone to a love hotel.

It felt like we had covered everything that modern middle school girls would think a Christmas date would involve. Having to deal with the data collection at each place had been an issue, but it had all been a new experience for me. Normally, I would never go to such places.

"You should remember what we did today. It might come in handy one day. I know any date you would come up with would be lame as hell. Like going to a local department store or something."

"…"

Wow. How did she know what I had done on Christmas last year?

"Any guy who takes a girl to KFC on Christmas Eve deserves to die."

"Students don't have much money! Give us a break!"

What's wrong with KFC!? I thought that was the standard! Am I wrong!?

There had been a fair amount of trouble, but Kirino had been extremely lively all night.

She had acted the same as when she had gone to Akihabara.

Both going around Shibuya looking at clothes and earrings and going around Akihabara looking at games and doujinshi were things she loved.

That was what she meant when she would say that she would no longer be herself if either of them were taken from her.

"Did you get all the data you needed?" I suddenly asked as we walked along the lit up streets.

"More or less. At the very least, I got enough to make it worth ruining my Christmas Eve plans," she answered from right next to me.

"I see."

That's good.

"What's with you? …That's creepy."

"Heh. It's nothing."

It was just that I was surprised by something.

The time had seemed to go by so quickly.

I wasn't sure what it was I was feeling.

I had never gone on an outing with just my sister like that before.

Was I feeling that it wasn't too bad? …No, no, no, no, no.

Hah. That just wouldn't be like me. It certainly wasn't that. After all, I'd have to be a masochist to feel being treated so horribly "wasn't too bad".

With the data collection over, we boarded the train home. Sitting next to me, my sister was muttering while lost in thought. She may have already been working out further details for her cell phone novel.

I had no idea if it was a good thing or not, but Kirino had already started writing her cell phone novel the very next day on Christmas.

And then the school term ended and winter break began.

New Year's Eve passed and the New Year began. It was the morning of New Year's Day.

As I walked down the stairs, I spotted my mom and gave my New Year's greeting.

"Hey, Happy New Year, mom. I'd like my New Year's money."

"Why do I have to give New Year's money to my son? "

Because that's how the system works? How cold. She could at least act a little less like that's the norm…

But in the Kousaka household that was the norm. As the eldest son, I only got New Year's money up through elementary school.

It really wasn't fair because Kirino still got some. You could feel the difference in the love they showed us.

"More importantly, aren't you going to the shrine with Manami-chan today? Don't you need to get going?"

"I've still got time."

I made a shooing motion with one hand and slipped by her side, but she grabbed my wrist from behind.

"Wait just a second. I still have something to talk to you about."

"What?"

"That."

My mom pointed through the slight opening in the living room door. Inside, Kirino was sitting in her usual

spot on the couch giving her whole attention to typing on her cell phone.

"Lately, she's been typing on her cell phone in every spare moment she has. Do you have any idea what she's doing?"

"Nope."

Unfortunately, I had promised to keep her cell phone novel a secret from my mom.

I feigned ignorance and my mom put one hand to her cheek worriedly.

"Remember how I told you she was going to be really busy at the end of the year? Well, even during winter break, she has track practice and lots of modeling jobs. Since – unlike you – I can be proud of her, that's fine, but I want her to at least take it easy when she's at home. She also doesn't seem to be getting enough sleep, but she won't tell me what she's doing. Before, she was still using her cell phone even in the bath! I was really shocked."

Ever since that data collection date, Kirino had been walking around the house with her cell phone in one

hand. Whether she was in the living room, the hallway, or the stairway, she would be typing away whenever I spotted her. She had been doing that the entire time, so I had actually wondered if she was writing her novel even in the bath. Apparently, she really had been.

"Also, she seems to have had a cold for a while now. She was a bit feverish again this morning…"

"Eh? Really?"

"Really. Really, really. So I'm worried. I don't know what she's working so hard on, but her health needs to take top priority. But no matter how many times I tell her that, she just ignores me. Really she's just so stubborn. She reminds me of a certain someone."

Ahhh! That idiot.

I had a good idea why she had that cold. It was clearly due to dumping that water on her in the cold winter weather.

I stared into the living room at her. She did indeed look like she was suffering. Her face was red, her breathing was heavy, and she would cough occasionally. She was clearly pushing herself.

What? No, I wasn't worried about her. I may have gone with her that day, but none of it really mattered to me. Why should I care what my little sister was doing?

It was just that…Well, you heard what my mom said. She had track practice, model work, and eroges, so I knew she was quite busy even outside of the novel.

"Well, I'm sure I'll manage somehow. Who do you think I am?"

She had said that, but she clearly was not managing.

It was because of how much effort she put into everything she did that I felt that way. And by "that way " I don't mean I was worried about her. Really.

"Kyousuke, do you really not know?"

"I really don't. In fact, I haven't spoken with her in a while now. You know that."

"Hmm, you're right. But I had thought you two were finally starting to get along. Did you get into a fight?"

"…Leave me alone."

Basically, she was done with me. The previous life consultation had been to go to Shinjuku with her and then to Shibuya. That was over.

That's right. The role for her brother was over and now it was her problem alone.

Our sibling relationship was back to when Kirino was so busy at the end of last year's summer break. In other words, we barely ever spoke, did not consult each other over anything, and just ignored each other.

Really, I was glad. I hadn't been dragged to Winter Comiket and had been able to have a nice leisurely New Year's. I had my usual peaceful days back.

"…Ah, I feel so refreshed."

As I watched my feverish sister continue to type on her cell phone, I muttered one thing in my heart.

Try not to go too overboard, okay?

"A cell phone novel? Hehh. Kirino-chan really is amazing."

"I'm not so sure. Well, she does work hard, I'll give her that. Oh, and she doesn't want our parents to know yet, so keep it a secret."

"Okay."

The topic of my sister came up while I was walking to the shrine with Manami.

Kirino didn't seem intent to keep the cell phone novel a secret from anyone but our parents, so I didn't hesitate to bring it up while chatting with my childhood friend.

They weren't particularly popular at the moment and writing one was nothing worth bragging about, but it was also nothing to be embarrassed about.

That was how Kirino and other middle school girls seemed to view cell phone novels.

Because movies and manga were made from them I had viewed them as being fairly popular, but apparently they weren't.

A few major hits like that one with a two kanji name or that Deep something or other one had merely created a kind of temporary cell phone novel bubble.

Well, I only brought it up as idle chatter. That world was of no concern to me.

After finishing with that topic, Manami timidly said, " Kyou-chan…What do you think…of my outfit?"

Befitting New Year's, Manami was wearing a light purple kimono. The style was like something an old lady would wear, but…

"Japanese clothes really do suit you."

That was one great thing about her. She wasn't all that attractive, but Japanese clothes had a way of tripling how good she looked.

"…R-really?"

"Yeah. If it were up to me, you'd always wear them."

"E-ehhh?"

From the way she blushed, Manami must have actually been happy.

While giving a bitter smile at how she was acting, I retied my scarf as it had started to come undone. I had been given the scarf as a present by Manami on Christmas Eve when I had stopped by on the way back from Shibuya.

When Manami saw me with the scarf on, she shyly said, “We match.”

“Keh,” I spat out and sped up, leaving my childhood friend behind.

The plaid scarf Manami was wearing despite wearing a kimono was one I had given her on Christmas Eve. I had bought it at as a present for her when I had been in 109 with Kirino. In a complete coincidence, the scarf I had bought and the one Manami had made for me were the exact same color and pattern. It was quite embarrassing. It was like we had been forced to wear matching scarves. Neither of us had intended for it to turn out that way.

She had even gone out of her way to wear it along with her kimono. The way we were walking around

wearing matching scarves, we had to have looked like a lovey-dovey couple. I had no idea what I would do if we ran into someone we knew.

"W-wait up."

Having been left behind, Manami jogged to catch up. I thought about speeding up even further, but then I stopped dead in my tracks.

"Wh-what is it?"

"Nothing really. It's just…Look."

I pointed forward with my eyes narrowed. A number of vans with tinted windows were parked by the riverside. I thought they looked familiar, and sure enough, three or four girls in kimonos got out of the vans .

"Oh, are they having another photo shoot? You know, like at the park half a year ago."

"Looks like it. From the way they're dressed, I'm guessing they're doing it at the shrine over there."

"I see… O-oh? Is that Ayase-chan?"

"Ugeh!?"

My back stiffened at the mention of that name.

I frowned and looked around. And I spotted her. She was there all right. That black-haired girl was wearing a blue kimono, had her hair done up, and was as overwhelmingly beautiful as ever.

She was Aragaki Ayase, a middle school girl who was Kirino's friend, classmate, and fellow model.

I don't feel like getting into the details, but I really did not like her. You could say she was my natural enemy.

After all, she felt I was a perverted siscon of a brother that was in love with his little sister and an eccentric otaku that collected little sister-themed eroge and doujinshi.

Also, she had a habit of saying she was going to kill me or have me arrested.

At any rate, I did not want to meet her. Luckily, she did not seem to have noticed us, so we could sneak away .

"Ayase-chaaan!"

"Don't wave her over here!"

"Huh? Why not? I thought you got along well with her , Kyou-chan."

That was before that sad incident! Aaaaaahhhhhh!! She noticed us! She's headed this way…

"Hello, onee-san. It's been a while! Happy New Year!"

"Y-yes. Happy New Year. It really has been a while. About half a year I think."

Manami seemed overpowered by Ayase's aura of beauty.

If you can't handle being near her, don't call her over.

As I glared spitefully at Manami, Ayase gave me a greeting that seemed to have a hidden meaning.

"Onii-san, it's been a while since I've seen you, too! Happy New Year! How are things with Kirino lately? Ah ha ha. Are you two getting along?"

She was definitely thinking “Depending on your answer, I may have to kill you” behind that cheerful smile.

“Th-things are going okay, I guess.”

Manami added to my timid and vague response.

“Ah hah. What are you saying, Kyou-chan. It seems to me that you have been getting along quite well with Kirino-chan lately. You know, like at Christmas.”

Wh-wh-why did you have to bring that up!?

“Christmas? Hehh. I can’t overlook that. Please tell me more!”

That is one scary smile! And she clearly isn’t smiling in the eyes!

“Sure. On Christmas, they went on a date and went to a public bath called Love Firefly[8].”

“Eh? A public bath on Christmas?”

Ayase was staring at me as if to say, "What kind of choice is that?"

Shut up!! I couldn't exactly tell Manami I went to a love hotel with my sister! That's why I had to make up that lie! And I'm well aware it's a really bad excuse!

"Th-that doesn't really matter. Hey, you look really good in that kimono! I guess that's a model for you! Ha ha ha!"

I tried to change the subject before she could pursue it any further.

"…"

I only received an awkward silence in return. She was glaring at me with cold eyes. She likely held a grudge because Kirino had turned down her invitation on Christmas Eve.

"Well, whatever. Anyway, onii-san, about Kirino. She does not seem to be doing too well..."

"Yeah, I know. But nothing I tell her will stop her."

"Yes. Sigh. I was hoping maybe you telling her would do something."

"I was hoping you could. I take it it didn't do any good."

Ayase and I came to an implicit understanding.

Not knowing what we were talking about, Manami was left with a quizzical look on her face.

From what Ayase said, it seemed Kirino was the same outside our home as she was in it.

Constantly working on her cell phone novel, that is.

"It was no good at all. She said her cold was not bad enough to affect her work and that she would not let it stop her. I of course admire her attitude toward work and it is amazing how she shows no sign of being under the weather while working, but it's clear she is pushing herself too hard. She won't listen to me at all, so I'm quite worried."

Ayase had been looking down at the ground as she spoke, but then she looked up at me and pushed out her lower lip bitterly.

"Please look out for her while she's at home."

"Sure thing. Thanks."

My little sister was not the type to neglect things she was supposed to do. I learned that first hand in the turmoil she had put me through.

Basically, she did not cut corners in anything she did. In a way, that could actually cause everything to suffer overall. She could be a quite troublesome to deal with and she was probably the most stubborn person I knew.

Once she had her mind set on something, no one could stop her, so it was best to just leave her alone.

You idiot. You shouldn't worry your friends like this.

Kirino finished her cell phone novel soon after winter break ended. It had taken her about 20 days since we had

collected all that data on Christmas Eve. I had no idea if that was fast or slow, but it was clear that she had given it her all.

I could tell that without even reading it.

"Zzz…"

Kirino was asleep sprawled across the living room desk with her cell phone in one hand.

Empty energy drink cans were scattered on and about the desk.

The lack of sleep had had quite an effect on her face which currently had no makeup on. I doubted she would be able to do any model work like that.

Those bags under her eyes would definitely be a problem.

But from what Ayase had told me, she didn't have much model work for a bit, so that was likely why she had allowed herself to get to that state. However, she really must have been working hard to let me see her like that. In fact, that may have been the first time I had ever seen her like that.

"Hm...Well…"

You really do shine when it comes to hard work.

With that comment to myself, I placed a blanket over my little sister's back.

第四章

Chapter 4

A week passed after she finished the manuscript for her cell phone novel and the morning of the annoying opening ceremony came.

Kirino had simply pushed herself too hard and her cold had gotten worse, so it seemed she was bedridden. I say "seemed" because she was so feverish that she stayed in her room even during meals, so I never had a chance to see her.

While I was eating breakfast, my mother came over to speak with me while looking a bit down.

"Kyousuke~. That girl still has a high fever, but she is insisting she goes to school."

"She's complaining about having practice and her job, isn't she?"

"Yes, exactly. Sigh. She simply won't listen, so I just asked your father to talk some sense into her."

I knew it. That idiot brought this on herself.

Well, she isn't going to get over this cold through pure willpower and she'll have no choice but to stay home today once dad lectures her.

Tch. She'll probably insist on going to school each and every day until she gets over this fever.

I could only shake my head.

"I'm worried, so I'm taking her to the hospital today. I've heard the flu has been going around lately."

"Oh, I see." I sipped at my miso soup. "Just warn her to make sure she doesn't give it to me."

"Hah. Why are you so heartless? You're her brother."

"Keh. Like I care about her."

Are you stupid? Worrying for her isn't going to make her get better any faster.

When I got back from school, my mom told me that Kirino did indeed have the flu. “Oh, I see,” was my honest reaction. I could not think of anything else to say.

After washing my hands and rinsing out my mouth more thoroughly than usual, I headed upstairs.

“…”

After a few moments of indecision, I knocked on my little sister’s door. She may have been asleep, so I knocked lightly.

I received no response. Deciding she must have been asleep, I scratched at my cheek and started to turn around, but then I heard a click and the door opened.

That door that usually slammed forcefully directly into my face had no energy today.

Kirino peered out at me in her pajamas through the cracked door.

“…What?”

…Oh, I haven't thought of anything to say. Why did I even knock on her door? I don't have any business with her. Um… uh…

"…Hey…do you want some yogurt?"

I held out the plastic bag hanging from one of my hands. I had bought the yogurt at a convenience store on the way home.

"…Sure."

Kirino's feverish head nodded and she took the convenience store bag. She seemed oddly docile, but that was likely because she did not have enough energy to verbally abuse me. Ironically, my sister was a lot cuter when she had the flu and didn't talk much. It was worth giving up my yogurt for.

"Have you taken your medicine?"

"…No."

"Take it."

I then realized Kirino was holding her cell phone in her left hand.

"What are you doing with your phone?"

Don't tell me she's still working on that novel…

"Quit being stupid and get back in bed."

"…"

Despite having been scolded by her brother, Kirino only hung her head down.

She seemed even more downhearted than you would expect of someone suffering from a fever.

Also, it looked a bit like she had been crying.

"What's wrong?"

"…Nothing."

Now, that's a lie. I can't have you thinking your brother is that stupid. I can tell how you're feeling to certain extent just by looking at you. And now that I think about it, someone with as strong a sense of responsibility and awareness that she is a professional as you should be doing nothing but trying to get over this illness on her day home from school.

"It isn't nothing, you idiot. If you're worried about something, tell me. Tell me and then get to sleep. You need to recover so you can get back to practice and work."

Kirino's eyes opened wide in surprise at my bluntness.

"…What's…with you? You're being surprisingly kind."

"Hah. I just want you to recover before you infect me."

I had been trying to speak harshly to her, but Kirino only gave a small laugh.

"You're an idiot," she said. "Well, whatever. Come in. I doubt you can do anything about it, but I'll tell you if you want to hear."

"Fine, fine."

I entered her room despite that meaning it would be my own fault if I caught her flu.

After inviting me in, Kirino sat on her bed and handed me her phone.

"Here."

"Wh-what?"

I recoiled back at having it thrust out at me so suddenly. I then took it and looked at the screen. The main page for Cell Phone i-Club was displayed on the LCD screen. The site had a large announcement written on it.

"An amazing newcomer to the cell phone novel world is having her debut work published in hard cover! It is being published by MediAscii Works! The whole novel is available ahead of time here on Cell Phone i-Club!"

Apparently, a hard cover novel from Cell Phone i-Club was being put online in full as a sales promotion.

Since the author was referred to as an "amazing newcomer" they must have had a lot of confidence in the novel.

The first thing that came to my mind was…

"Is this 'amazing newcomer' they're talking about you!? Wow!"

"…"

Kirino gave no response. She took the phone from me, pressed some buttons while coughing a few times, and then handed it back to me. I looked at the screen and saw what must have been a page of the cell phone novel this "amazing newcomer" had written.

Its title was "Little Sister Sky".

"Well, that couldn't be any more obviously you!"

I could tell without even glancing through the text. This was clearly the cell phone novel Kirino had written.

The novel Kirino had so desperately worked to finish was awash in the limelight in a big way.

Below the title was a button labeled "review this work ". I clicked it and a large number of people's impressions of the novel popped up.

"What a good story!" "I cried." "Their pure love was the best part." "As a girl, this really moved me."

They went on and on. The book had not even been released yet and there were already over 100 reviews. And they were all favorable impressions. From what I

could see, the novel had the strongest support from young girls.

…That's amazing.

I didn't actually say it out loud, but that was what I thought. But I was also a little dissatisfied that the readers had seen Toshi and Rino's relationship as pure love like the author had.

After tagging along when she was gathering data and watching as she worked so hard to write the novel, I was actually moved by this positive reaction. I was amazed at how much talent she had.

…Sigh. She's increased the gap yet again. How far behind are you trying to leave your brother, little sister? It's so frustrating and pathetic that I might just get depressed.

As a smile that was a mixture of self-torture and joy appeared on my face, I realized something.

"Wait, then why do you look so upset?"

I didn't make sense. The novel she had worked so hard to write was being well received, had a huge announcement, and was being published. Normally, that would be a time for joy.

"…else."

"Ah? What?"

"They've made it so it's written by someone else!" Kirino shouted as if she was about to cough up blood before she started coughing normally.

"H-hey, are you okay?"

She seemed to be suffering so much that I reached out to pat her on the back, but she brushed my hand aside.

She was still coughing pretty badly, so I wasn't about to get angry with her.

"What do you mean they made it so it's written by someone else?"

After coughing a bit more and catching her breath, she said, "I-I mean that I'm the one that wrote it, but the

author is given as some penname I've never seen before in my life."

I looked and, sure enough, it said "Author – Rino" below the title. The author's name was the same as the protagonist of Little Sister Sky. Presumably they were trying to make it look like the story was something the author had actually experienced, as was common with cell phone novels.

"So they changed the penname without asking because they thought it would sell better with the author and the protagonist having the same name?"

"No! That's not what happened…!" My little sister fell into another painful-looking fit of coughing. "I wouldn't be so upset if that was all it was. Ever since I sent him the password to the site where I saved the manuscript, I haven't heard anything from him. When I call the cell phone number written on the business card, I just get the voice mail, I don't get any response to my emails, and this page appeared without warning."

The site where she saved the manuscript? …Oh, I get it. You save a cell phone novel to your blog-like page on a cell phone site as you write it.

"Maybe there's been some kind of misunderstanding. How about I call the editorial department for you?"

"I already called them! I told them I wrote the novel and that no one was contacting me and asked them what was going on, but they wouldn't tell me anything! They listened to what I had to say, but they just treated it like a common complaint and wouldn't transfer me over to my editor. Also, the password to the Cell Phone i-Club site I saved the manuscript to was changed, so I can't log in!"

"So…"

This was not a turn of events I wanted to think about. But if *what I thought was going on was indeed going on*, then having my little sister speak the decisive words would have been too cruel.

That was why I stated my conclusion even if it was a bit premature to jump to that conclusion.

"He plagiarized you? That editor we met in Shinjuku before took the cell phone novel you wrote and is releasing it under someone else's name?"

"…I think so. …What else could it be?" Kirino muttered painfully while sitting on her bed.

Her face was red from her fever and I could see tears welling up in her eyes. Having this trouble occur while she was bedridden from the flu was like kicking her while she was down.

"So what are you going to do? Surely you aren't just going to lie here crying."

"I'm not going to do anything," was my little sister's unexpected response. "Make no mistake. I only told you about this because you asked. I have no intention of doing anything about this trouble. In fact, I wasn't worried about this at all."

"Why not?"

That had to have been a lie. She had worked so hard on it and it had all been snatched away from her.

I knew just how much she hated to lose, so I knew she had to hate it with all of her being.

"Why not?" repeated Kirino with a scornful laugh. " Isn't that obvious? What I need to do right now is work my hardest to recover and get back to work and practice as soon as I can. Even if I was tricked, that only affects

me. I don't have time to deal with something like that. I have much more important things to do."

Her arrogant tone made it sound like she was looking down on the entire world. To me, it sounded forced.

After another fit of coughing, she continued.

"It does piss me off that I was used and I want to kill that faggot. But isn't all that just more proof of my talent? He only stole my novel because it was that valuable, right? Heh. If that one was stolen, I just need to write another one. I'll make this one even more amazing." Kirino folded her arms like usual and gave a small laugh. "Also, that cell phone novel was really nothing more than something to do for fun. I tried to keep it up alongside everything else, but I only ended up collapsing and causing trouble for everyone. I've learned my lesson. I'll make sure that never happens again. In a way, this was perfect."

If she hadn't so clearly been crying, that might have sounded pretty cool.

"So just get out of here and leave me alone."

You really do suck at lying.

My little sister was indeed amazing. She had plenty of talent, put in plenty of hard work, and had an almost creepy passion for something once she started it. As a result, I had thought that everything would always go the way she wanted. However, she was not without her weaknesses.

She had major problems dealing with trouble she had not expected. With difficulties that she saw coming, she was able to thoroughly prepare herself and come up with a plan. But when an attack came from a blind spot or she came across a problem she had not prepared for, she had no idea what to do.

I had experienced that weakness of my sister's in the troubles with dad and Ayase.

She was only 14 years old and in middle school.

No matter how amazing or talented she seemed, I could not forget that fact.

I was her big brother, after all.

"Hoo…"

What do I do now?

After hearing what my little sister had to say and leaving her room, I bit my lower lip while thinking.

Except I wasn't really thinking. While the voice of my heart may have been asking what to do, I had already decided deep down.

What I was doing was worrying. I could not accept why I was so settled on what to do.

After all, I hated my little sister. I really, really hated her.

I may be repeating myself, but I just want to make that very clear.

I had only ever accepted that life consultation way back when as a careless way to end that conversation with her as quickly as possible. My efforts to help her with the trouble with dad or the issues with Ayase were nothing but abnormalities. I had only done those things to put an end to the life consultations I had started. That was why, since she had said she wasn't going to do

anything and had not "consulted" in me, this had nothing to do with me. Seeing that damn conceited brat suffer a defeat like that should have been a refreshing scene to behold.

"Shit…What is going on?"

These vague feelings had not started just then. They were a major problem I had been carrying for a little bit at that point. My distant relationship with my sister had changed when I had learned her secret and she had come to me with those life consultations. The vague distance between us was continuing to change even then. I was losing the indifference I had for my little sister.

What was going on? I tried to peer into my own heart, but I only found a jumbled mess of swirling feelings there. That was no help.

I felt nauseous and annoyed and disgusted…

Agh! This really pisses me off. What am I supposed to do? I can't get over this.

Tch. What is this? I wish I knew someone in a similar position, so I could ask them.

Why do I have to feel so bad for that brat of a little sister?

Don't tell me I'm wrong about hating her. Don't tell me I actually…

"Gyahhh!! Like hell I do!"

As my true feelings came out in a yell, I began doing *what my sister would normally do on her own* since she was too sick to do it herself.

But really, all I could do was consult those who I felt would be reliable.

"Thank you for being so open with us, Kyousuke-shi! I do not know how much I can actually do, but I will help in any way I can!" said Saori exaggeratedly as she sat across from me.

As usual, she was in full otaku fashion with her spiral glasses & flannel shirt tucked into her pants.

"I get the general situation. However, I find it hard to believe that rape novel ended up like that. But from how displeased you seem, it must be true," said Kuroneko as she sipped iced coffee while sitting next to Saori.

We were in a McDonald's near Matsudo Station. I had emailed the two of them to say I wanted to discuss something about Kirino and they had agreed to meet on the weekend because they had both happened to be headed to the preliminaries for a national Siscalypse tournament. The preliminaries had already been held in a nearby arcade called Tokyo Gulliver, and the bag sitting on Kuroneko's lap had a badge indicating she had made it through the preliminaries. (It had the same design as an important item in the game and it had the words "True Little Sister" engraved into it with holographic film placed over them.)

That all-black gothic lolita girl was monstrously good at video games.

The arcade version of that game had come out during the fall, but I had yet to play it.

It was just too embarrassing to play a game like that in front of other people. I had actually been to a local arcade

and one in Akagi, so it wasn't that I simply hadn't gone. How can people just go to an arcade and play games like that Something-or-Other Master where you raise an idol or that quiz game called Something-or-Other Academy? Do you overcome the embarrassment just by getting used to it? I don't really get it myself.

By the way, the badge on Kuroneko's bag had the player's name carved into it, but what it said was Chiba District Representative – Matsudo Black Cat-sama.

Was that something like a ring name?

"Hmm, I see. So that is why she did not come to Winter Comiket."

"Kyousuke-shi. Kuroneko-shi has actually been worried about Kiririn-shi ever since that. We had known she had caught a cold, but Kuroneko-shi had been wondering if she was okay with it lasting so long. And she looked so lonely."

"Hah. I would prefer if you did not add in dramatizations like that. I have not been worried about her. It is just that I was planning to have her cosplay and sell my circle's book if she had accepted my request. I need to get back at her for before. And yet she caught a

cold and could not come. She lamented how unlucky she was while clearly sneering."

"I see…"

So she wanted Kirino to take part in that winter event… She put together all sorts of plans and then Kirino couldn't come. I can see why she would be feeling lonely.

"Sorry….and thanks."

"I have no idea why you are apologizing or why you are thanking me."

Kuroneko turned away in displeasure. For some reason, she always got like that when someone praised her or thanked her. I had thought she must have been embarrassed, but Kirino had told me it was something else.

"Oh, no, no. The way that *black thing* always does that is not her being a tsundere. She's feeling ressentiment. Whenever a rebellious and disgusting otaku like her receives approval from someone on the winning side like me, they always get really pissed off. Really, the jealousy of a lower life form is just disgusting."

I don't really understand what she meant, but that was what she had said. In any case, she really spoke poorly of the girl.

"Getting by without seeing that sweets girl who thinks she is on the winning side during the whole new year's period was most refreshing."

I still think she is just shy, though. After all, I had been the one to compliment her and I was certainly not on the "winning side".

Hearing what Kuroneko said, Saori came to the same conclusion as me.

"Hah hah hah. What are you saying, Kuroneko-shi? You did not find it refreshing at all. It hurts my heart to think about how sad someone without a boyfriend like you must have been during that time without seeing Kiririn-shi."

"That certainly is arrogant of you. Heh. I can tell just by looking at you, that you are forever alone. If you want to prove me wrong, just tell me what you were doing on Christmas."

"Oh, me? Let's see, last Christmas I was painting my Gabthley and making my avatar for Xbox Live. Ha. I was so pleased at how the avatar looked exactly like me that I uploaded a picture to our social network group and bragged about it on Twitter."

What a sad way to spend Christmas…

"Oh? But I think the person I was speaking to online during that was you, Kuroneko-shi."

"…Th-that's right…"

The topic Kuroneko herself had brought up had blown up in her face. She had been trying to mock Saori by asking her what she had done on Christmas, but the response had been "chatting with you".

Matsudo Black Cat aka Kuroneko cleared her throat to smooth things over and said, "To get back on topic, you said this ridiculously titled Little Sister Sky cell phone novel may have been stolen, but can you give us more details?"

"You…will help too?"

"…You surprise me. Is your head okay? I am of course asking out of sheer curiosity. Why would I clean up after a pathetic human like her? I would prefer if you thought before you spoke."

Kuroneko gave lovely little sigh.

"…I see."

Kirino had not asked either Saori or Kuroneko to help with her difficulty, but they had still gathered and were willing to listen. The thought very nearly brought a tear to my eye.

"You two are such good people."

"I do not want to hear that from you of all people. Do you just interpret what people say however you want, you masochistic dog?" spat out Kuroneko with extreme disagreeableness.

When I had first met her, I had thought she was an unsociable girl, but that may not have been true. Deep down, at least.

"Heh heh. Very true," said Saori when she heard what I had said. She also put on her usual -shaped smile. "

Come to think of it, this is the first time we have met with you without Kiririn-shi being here. There is something I had been meaning to ask you if I got a chance. With the offline meeting where we first met and Summer Comiket last year, why do you keep going above and beyond for your sister? At least on the surface, it seems to be nothing but a bother for you."

Saori asked me the question Kuroneko had before.

But as before, it was a difficult question to answer. After all, I had been constantly asking myself that very same question and had yet to come up with a satisfactory answer.

While I was thinking, Saori leaned in toward me.

"Are my suspicions correct that you two are in a more 'serious' relationship?"

"What do mean by 'more serious'!? No! Don't get the wrong idea!"

And what was that about your "suspicions"!? Have you been looking at us in that way all this time!?

This is why I hate erogamers! They always see incest wherever they look!

"Mh," said Saori while sticking out her lower lip when I denied it, but she then put on a horrifying expression. " Oh, is that not it? Then Kyousuke-shi, are you – shall we say – masochistically inclined?"

"That's not it either!"

Why do otaku all seem to have the exact same thought patterns? I can't stand it!

As I scratched at my head, I received unexpected support from Kuroneko.

"It is not that surprising. Being worried about one's little sister and getting a bit overprotective is something that goes beyond liking or not liking someone."

It was possible she was saying that because she had little sisters of her own.

"That is just what a little sister is. It can't be helped. You do it even if you do not get anything in return for your efforts. It is like taking in a cat on a whim."

After concluding her comment, she closed her eyes. She must have been imagining her own little sisters as she spoke. Her words came as smoothly as when she had been speaking about her doujin work at Summer Comiket and her words were also kind.

Her comment also put an expression on Saori's face like you would expect of someone soaking in a hot spring.

"Hm…You must be a wonderful older sister, Kuroneko-shi."

"…Not really. I tease them every day."

Seeing the sadistic smile on Kuroneko's face, I felt saved. The strange feeling in my chest was still there, but I now felt like there was nothing wrong with it being there.

It was okay for my brother/sister relationship with Kirino to advance at whatever pace I was comfortable with.

I felt convinced.

"Okay, let's do this!"

I slammed my fist into my opposite palm.

Saori gave thumbs up with a smile and Kuroneko shrugged expressionlessly.

I had chosen Saori and Kuroneko to discuss this with because they both knew Kirino's secret side and Kirino was important to both of them.

Due to Kirino's position in the world, I had to be careful about who to discuss this kind of thing with. They worked from that standpoint and I figured they would know a thing or two about the writing business, so they were perfect. I was truly thankful.

By the way, there were actually two others who met the requirements I mentioned.

Those were my dad and Ayase. If I got the help of either of them, I doubt there would have been any more powerful helper and their efforts would have rivaled that of a thousand others. However, even if Kirino was extremely important to both of them and they would

certainly have listened carefully and helped out had I consulted them, they both had major problems preventing me from doing so.

I'm sure you understand. Their help wouldn't exactly come easily.

First of all, my dad still did not now Kirino's cell phone novel was being published because she was sure he would be against it. And yet Kirino had pushed herself too hard and collapsed from the flu. It was hindering her track team practice and the model work she had gotten special permission for. It would make no sense to rely on our dad for this. If we did, we would need to be prepared for his opposition to her otaku interests to be ignited once more once it was all over.

As for Ayase, I had actually had a chance to speak to her a few days before. (She had called me about Kirino collapsing from the flu. Even though I had warned Kirino, I still got one hell of a lecture about it.)

What she had said afterwards was, "Everyone always praises Kirino for her attitude toward her work, so it

really is no big deal if she takes a bit of time off because she is sick. However, I know Kirino. She is going to feel really bad about missing work due to her own mistake."

Apparently, Ayase had spoken to their office and the magazines and volunteered to take on the model work early in the year that Kirino had been scheduled for. She said it would be best if she did it and that Kirino would not feel as bad than if anyone else had done it.

"So I will not be visiting her," she had said.

"I understand. If you catch her flu, you can't fill in for her. I'm not quite sure what to say, but tha-"

"No, do not thank me. I am only doing this because I want to."

Ayase was helping Kirino in her time of need in her own unique way.

We were not the only ones getting overly involved in this.

I could leave that kind of thing to her and take care of what I could here.

And so, I treated Saori and Kuroneko to fries and refills to their drinks while I explained the details of how Kirino's cell phone novel might have been plagiarized.

"I see…"

"Hm…"

Saori and Kuroneko both listened with patient expressions.

"Really, I just want to check if what I think is going on is really what is going on. This editor named Kumagai Ryuunosuke seems suspicious to me," I concluded.

"Hmm. I understand where you are coming from," said Saori in a grave voice as she gathered her thoughts. "But would a mere employee take such a great risk? Even if he was sure that Kiririn-shi's novel would sell, he would lose his standing if this plagiarism came to light."

"And even if this editor did this, I do not understand why he would steal the manuscript. Instead of stealing it, would it not be better to sell the author herself? I think it would sell even better if it said 'the debut work of a

beautiful middle school model' on the cover. They could get her face out there with interviews for a cheap and effective means of advertisement."

Those are excellent points.

"But it's hard to imagine this editor had nothing to do with this," I said.

"Kyousuke-shi, if you have his business card with you, could we see it?"

"Sure. This is it."

On Saori's suggestion, I pulled out the business card that editor had given Kirino.

The card read, "Kumagai Ryuunosuke – MediAscii Works Second Editorial Department Mobile Publication Division"

I placed it in the middle of the table and the two of them leaned forward to give it a serious inspection.

"Hmm. Does this Mobile Publication Division run Cell Phone i-Club?"

"I have actually seen a business card for this publisher before, and this looks real to me. I doubt it is a forgery. And even if it is a fake, detailed knowledge of the original would have been necessary to make it," said Saori in agreement with what Kirino had said before.

Kuroneko then said, "Is there actually a Kumagai working for the editorial department?"

"Yes, I called and checked with the receptionist, and there is. It was treated as a prank call, though."

"This is only what I have heard, but supposedly the editorial department receives complaints about plagiarized works all the time. Of course, most of them are incorrect assumptions or downright lies, but the department still hears complaint after complaint along those lines. They may think this is just another of those."

That was the "Boy who Cried Wolf" effect. Finding the one true complaint amid the hundreds of lies would indeed be difficult.

Kuroneko picked up the business card and narrowed her eyes.

"This has a cell phone number and email address written in pen underneath the editorial department's contact information."

"Is that a problem? He said he was out a lot, so it would be easier to contact him via his personal phone and address."

"How trusting are you? You need to have some suspicions about people. Did you never think he was having her call him because it would be a problem for him if she called the company? It's just…Oh, I see. Given what Saori said, I am betting this card itself is real."

"Meaning?"

"Are you thinking the person Kiririn-shi met in Shinjuku was a fake taking on the name and occupation of Kumagai-shi, Kuroneko-shi?"

"Yes."

Kuroneko nodded.

"You mean that bastard wasn't the actual editor?"

"I believe so."

"But this is the actual business card of this Kumagai Ryuunosuke. And they met up at the publisher's office building."

"Don't be stupid. Neither of those things proves he is an editor that works for that publisher. She was told to meet him in the publisher's *lobby*, right? And you said the actual meeting took place in a nearby café. The lobby isn't locked, so an outsider could easily meet someone there. Also, he could have handed over a business card he had gotten from the real editor to give credibility to his claim. It is a fairly popular means of fraud."

"…Fraud?"

"Yes, there is a type of self-paid publishing fraud where someone approaches a hopeful author while pretending to be an editor. The fake editor suggests he publishes the hopeful author's book, has them give a down payment, and then is never seen again. …A bit similar, don't you think?"

"But Kirino never had any money taken."

"True. In this case, it was the manuscript that was stolen, and it is being published by a proper publisher under someone else's name. The trick is similar, but it is still a bit different. I think these differences are rather important," said Saori prudently. "Perhaps this man pretending to be Kumagai-shi has some kind of connection with the publisher. Otherwise, he could not have gotten the novel published even with the manuscript and he would not have been able to acquire Kumagai-shi's business card."

Saori took out her cell phone and held it out so everyone could see the screen.

It was displaying the introductory page for Little Sister Sky.

"I cannot be sure, but it seems likely this Rino person is the one who stole Kiririn-shi's manuscript. I do not know what position this person has, but he must have some influence at the publisher. First, Rino-shi must have noticed the popularity of Kiririn-shi's cell phone novel on the upload site, so he used the real Kumagai-shi's business card to take on the identity of an editor and approach Kiririn-shi. Once Rino-shi received the manuscript from Kiririn-shi, he took it to the editorial

department as something he had written, and successfully had it published. Does that seem realistic?"

"Yes, except for the fact that this…criminal?...set his sights on that rape novel. How could he read that and come to the conclusion that it would sell? It is incomprehensible," said Kuroneko as she tilted her head back and forth in confusion.

"That cell phone novel was first in the monthly rankings and had 350,000 views in just a month after being submitted. Maybe he decided Kirino would write a novel that would sell because of how the amateurs were receiving it."

"That is what makes no sense to me. Any readers who enjoyed a shitty novel like that seem like the residents of the demon world to me."

That's going a bit too far.

Not only did Kuroneko have a sense of rivalry and jealousy toward Kirino, but she also seemed to have a negative impression of cell phone novels as a whole. She picked the cell phone up from the center of the table and stared coldly at the screen that was displaying Little Sister Sky's prologue. (It was the scene where Tetsu was

hit by the dump truck and turned to mincemeat. The text was as full of newlines as ever.)

"Hmph. Look at this. The shitty writing starts on the very first page. Someone getting hit by a dump truck isn't going to make a 'bakohn' sound. Honestly, just glancing through this is bringing its author's triumphant smile into my head and making me want to crush this cell phone more and more."

"K-Kuroneko-shi!? That is my phone!" Saori shouted as the phone started creaking in Kuroneko's grip.

Kuroneko clicked her tongue and put the phone back on the table.

"So there are really people who would publish writing this bad with no shame? Both the editor and the readers have no aesthetic sense whatsoever."

…Why does she view the editor in such a hostile light?

Did something happen to her in the past?

"Now, now," said Saori to pacify her. "At any rate, Rino-shi is someone who can tell what will sell and has guidance on the level of a real editor. He really did meet

with Kiririn-shi, advised her, and actually convinced her. And now he has gotten the novel published. I may not be an expert, but it feels to me like Little Sister Sky will be a major hit."

"Maybe. After her meeting with him, Kirino completely trusted him. She had been really excited, but she had not taken any of it for granted until she had actually met him."

"Hah. To be honest, I want to tell her this serves her right. I had a feeling it was something like this. Do you have any idea how many dozens of hours she bragged to me about this last month?"

…Why am I not surprised? I knew it was unlikely Kirino hadn't bragged to Kuroneko…

Saori looked very interested in that comment.

"Ya ha ha. Come to think of it, the online battle between you two reached even our SNS group. Was the direct confrontation over IM?"

" 'Kya ha ha! With how you are, you'll never be anything but a wannabe! You should try to learn from me! Oh, but I guess you can't! You don't have the talent!'

I had to put up with that for an entire night on Skype. I will never forget my grudge over that."

"…Ah, sorry about that."

I had no choice but to apologize when she stared at me with those red eyes filled with hatred.

Kuroneko must have been quite a good person to help Kirino even after experiencing that.

Anyway, that was how we deduced who the thief likely was.

But we could not come up with any concrete ideas regarding what to do about it.

"We have a good idea what the situation is now, but what are we actually supposed to do? I know it would be best to make them realize Kirino was the one that wrote that cell phone novel. But…"

"That will prove quite difficult."

"Yes, we have no proof."

"What about the original manuscript data?"

"The site she saved it to was taken over by this guy. The second she gave him the password, he changed it so she couldn't get into it anymore…or something like that."

That meant we had no evidence that Kirino had written the novel.

Refusing to give up, Kuroneko said, "Is the manuscript data still on her computer? Like a backup or…"

"Kuroneko-shi, even if Kiririn-shi has a backup, I doubt it will change much. The entire novel has already been released on the web. If we came forward saying she had the original manuscript data, they would simply say we copied it from the web."

"…Hmm. That may have been done as insurance made to look like advertisement. …This guy thought this through surprisingly well."

He was always a step ahead of us. If our assumptions were correct, he was quite crafty.

Silence fell over our table. The three of us each ate the fries that were cold by that point, sipped at our drinks, and gathered our thoughts in our own way."

Saori was the first one to give an idea.

"It seems to me, the only thing we can do is explain the situation to the editorial department and convince them that Kiririn-shi was the author. As Kyousuke-shi mentioned before, calling by phone merely gets treated as a common complaint. To avoid that, we need to get in direct contact with someone working on the Little Sister Sky project."

"…Hmph. Thanks for pointing out the obvious. So how are normal middle and high school students supposed to get in contact with someone from the editorial department?"

"…I do happen to have a connection."

"R-really?" I replied in surprise.

Come to think of it, she did say she had seen that publisher's business card before.

Natural curiosity grew within me, so I started to ask for details about this connection, but I stopped once I saw her expression.

Looking troubled, Saori was scratching at her cheek. It looked like she was having trouble saying something.

"…Yes. But it is not all that strong a connection. I cannot exactly say the novel was stolen and directly ask to have something done. I can only use some reason or another to get an appointment at the publisher. Unfortunately, that is all I can do. It seems Kumagai-shi belongs to the second editorial department's mobile publication division, but it would be difficult to get an appointment with that specific division with my connection. I do not directly know anyone in the editorial department."

"No, that's enough. Thanks, Saori. You really are reliable."

I was truly thankful. I may have been the one to ask her, but I felt bad about being that indebted to her. It seemed she did not really want to use this connection.

I bowed my head deeply, but she stuck both hands forward to stop me and said, "Ah ha ha ha. Stop that. You are making me blush."

Saori rubbed the back of my head and suddenly switched over to a serious tone of voice.

"If it gets that kind of response, then it was worth playing the role of Saori Bajeena."

"…Ahn?"

"Hah hah hah. Nothing, just talking to myself."

I decided to let the comment go.

"Okay, I can get us into the publisher, but what do we do then?"

"I have an idea for that. Just leave it to me. …Heh heh heh. If it goes well, I can create a reason to go to the editorial department not just once, but two or three times ."

Hearing that, I felt a chill run down my spine. Kuroneko's thin, eerie smile was similar to the one my little sister had when she handed me an eroge box.

Two days later, at morning, I went to the Shinjuku publishing company together with Kuroneko.

Saori wasn't here, probably because she needed to use her connection to give us a chance to enter. Since she acted like it's a touchy subject, I didn't ask any further.

The truth is, deep down, I knew that there is no need to ask anymore.

"…Fourth floor, editor department huh…."

"…."

No answer. Just like the usual Kuroneko.

…But, how should I put it, she is the type who rarely speaks anything. By the way, compared to Kirino who wore formal clothing to the meeting, Kuroneko still wore her usual black gothic loli. Does she have any other clothes?...*Of course there is no way I could dare say that out loud, thus I remained silent. Beside, these clothes…*

She looked like an adult from games who always wore the same clothes whenever they went outside.

While I was thinking randomly, Kuroneko had entered the lobby and walked toward the elevator.

Right after we exited the elevator, we saw a phone right in front of us and two ways leading to both sides. Looks like we could call the editorial department from here.

Took the phone, I inputted the number:

"Please to meet you. It's Dengeki Bunko Editorial Department."

"Ah…well, we had a meeting with someone there, I'm Kousaka."

"Kousaka-san right? Please wait a moment."

"Sorry, is this the second department?"

"Yes, this is Media ASC II Work, second department, Dengeki Bunko Editorial Department."

So that Kumagai Ryuunosuke is here, in the Dengeki Bunko 's phone novel editor department huh?

In short, I'm at the right place.

I put the phone down. A short moment later, one door on the left opened, a glasses man appeared, probably to

get us. We followed him inside till the large working area .

"Sorry for intrude…."

So this is the editor department…To tell the truth, it was a bit chaotic.

Although the floor was clean and everything was cleaned properly, there was a lot here.

Aside from the many paper boxes on the floor, there were a lot of figures of girls. It looked like an otaku's room. It didn't look okay for a working area.

"Please sit here."

"Thank you."

We entered a workshop with four chairs. Should we begin discussing it here?

Kuroneko and I chose our place and sat down.

After we removed our cloak, putting our bag down, and taking a sip of tea ---

"Phew ---"

Okay, I can start now.

"Ah…I feel a bit nervous…I wonder if any workshop is the same ~"

I spoke to Kuroneko (who was next to me), but….

"……."

Her eyes opened wide, her face stiff like a zombie; there were cold sweats on her forehead.

"…Hey hey Kuroneko! Calm down. Are you okay?"

"I'm fine….."

No you are not. It looked like your soul could escape through your mouth any moment!

This is the battle plan that YOU prepared!

"……But it's true. You should be more nervous than me. Sorry for making you to go through this."

"No need to apologize to me."

With her eyes half closed, Kuroneko replied.

"Beside, this is just an excuse for me; I had no reason to be nervous."

Kuroneko tried to act tough, but one could easily tell that she was lying.

Okay, I should explain thing now. Today we came here because of a 'contribution'.

In short, contribution meant that you brought your manga or novel directly to the editor department then begged them to use your work. I heard that – after they looked at your work and decided whether or not they could be used, sometime they would give an instruction or told you how to improve your work, or introduced you to another department. Of course, if your work is not good enough, you might be heavily lectured or outright rejected. Worse case, you would leave while they laughed at you from behind.

Kuroneko once told me: "You really had no real experience, stop saying so much."

Here wasn't as noisy as I thought (I predicted this place would have a scary editor who always screamed

loudly, and many staffs who were busy with writers), but I could hear the staff talking with other authors.

So this is Dengeki Bunko's phone novel editor department like.

Thanks to Saori's connection, we can safety entered this place to let them see our 'contribution'.

In other words, we were here to do recon. Let me summaries our job here for you.

We were at 'Degenki Bunko, second editor department '.

And 'Kumagai Ryuunosuke' belonged to 'Second department, phone novel group'.

He is the one we are looking for.

After carefully considered Kuroneko's novel, we decided to ask Saori for a favor to go to this 'Dengeki Bunko second Editorial Department'. If we are lucky, we might be able to meet that 'Kumagai Ryuunosuke'.

Since it wasn't something we had experience in, we were very nervous.

"Say, why are you here empty handed? Where is your novel?"

"I sent them ahead…How could I denied them the right to read it until now?"

Ah ~ yeah, that's right.

"By the way, what did you send…?"

"Before…I came to your house, remember? There was a black notebook. That was the one ---"

"……..You meant….that?"

"Is something wrong?"

"Nothing…."

That… that book…that Kirino rated 'not worth a single coin '…you sent that?

Will…will it be okay?…But there is something else that demanded my attention immediately…

"About that…because we are going to meet with an adult, you shouldn't speak to them like a friend."

She wasn't behind Kirino in badmouthing others.

"…Hm...I know that without you telling me."

Kuroneko raised a hand to cover her face, then her other hands quickly rose to the side.

Then – her iris turned black.

"….Camouflage success. This personality should be fine, right?"

Wait what? What is with that 'I had switched my personality to something suited for a formal meeting' development?

You just removed your contact lens, didn't you?

"Are you for real…?"

I had no time to confirm, because someone just entered the room.

That was a man who wore a white scarf like a pirate. He had a warm sheep-fur cloak, which made him looked like a manager.

"Ah, sorry sorry! The one that you are supposed to meet still hasn't arrived! Sorry, can you please wait five more minutes?"

"Ah..sure."

"Really? Thank you! During that time, feel free to look at those magazines over here!"

Because he was apologizing non-stop, he seemed to be a good man.

But he told us to read those magazines…and then he sat down right in front of us.

"Please to meet you, my name is Henkutsu. I might look like this, but I'm an editor too."

"Then…Henkutsu-san?"

"Haha, strange right? Everyone here had a nickname for themselves. We always called each other via nickname."

Why does it sound like a secret evil organization? I really wanted to get out of here!

"But you two are a rare case. Usually, we don't accept contributions from outside unless they are from professional or semi-professional author. Not to mention that your work was quite special."

"I see…"

From the beginning, I could only say 'I see'. I never thought that he also had read Kuroneko's work.

"Yes, but that was back when our company was still small – you see, we used to buy and sell that stuff."

Henkutsu pointed around.

But the way he said…it wasn't clear what exactly what he talked about. Looked like Henkutsu-san misunderstood, thinking that we already had basic knowledge about this company, so it's understandable that sometimes we failed to understand him.

Although I realized that, I didn't ask him back 'when exactly is that'. Why you ask? Because Saori looked like she didn't want to mention this connection of hers.

Kuroneko didn't say anything too. Or rather, she didn' t say anything since Henkutsu-san entered.

"But we still decided to give your work a shot then meet you this time."

So he decided to come clear about it?

"Although it's only my personal opinion, but I do agree that your work is quite special. Your work is a doujinshi about Maschera, in a time travel fashion, right? I liked Maschera too myself, so I understand the desire to make a time travel story. To tell the truth, your story used too much reference from the original, so the reader might not be able to understand it easily. I could read a huge reference without problem, but most people can't. You should pay attention to that too."

"Ah…ack…."

Hm, not bad Kuroneko! He got a point!

I secretly glared at her, only to see that there was a hint of red in her usual emotionless face. Of course, that didn' t change the fact that we came here to find out more about whatever happened with 'Maisora', especially ' Kumagai Ryuunosuke'. This contribution was only an excuse.

But if Kuroneko's story could gain anything from this, that didn't sound bad.

"Ah right right, you two – since I didn't know what kind of author you are, I was quite surprise to see that you are so young, not to mention that you are two people instead of one."

"I see."

"So, in other words, that story was written by both of you? There was a manga sent together to us…so one of you took care of the original story?"

"No…."

Before I could speak – that I only followed Kuroneko here, she interrupted me:

"That's right, we brother and sister did that together."

"I see."

"Wait..! What are you saying…!"

Kuroneko immediately covered my mouth, and didn't allow me to speak.

Her emotionless black iris stared directly at me:

"Am I wrong – Nii-san?"

"……..!?"

Since when did we have that setup? I knew nothing about it ?

With eyes full of hated, I stared back, but if Kuroneko already said so then there was nothing I could do to correct her.

My only option was to keep up, so I answered him:

"That's right, we both did that."

"What exactly is your part in this?"

You asked me what is my part…..Kuroneko did everything, how should I answer now?

I scratched my head and hesitated, but Kuroneko answered in my place like it's nothing:

"Nii-san helped me about reference, like name for special skill and like…."

"Like, this 'Divine Demonic Destructive Thrust'?"

"Yes, he came up with this after wreaking his brain."

I never did that! It's just your opinion only!

Kuroneko glanced at me…

"The truth is I did both the manga and novel. But Nii-san helped me with reference, which is something absolutely vital to me, so that's why I said we both did."

Damn! That look on your face…like you are giving me a reward…I never asked you to do that!

In other words, now, that super big book is my work too? I never actually read it, and wasn't it the same one that Kirino bashed heavily and called it a black history, a book of sorcery?

"Uhm…but I couldn't imagine what 'Divine Demonic Destructive Thrust' is like."

Look! He has a very troubled expression!

Hearing a criticized, Kuroneko looked displeased and narrowed her eyes, but she kept asking:

"Then... Henkutsu-san, what would you name it?"

"That…."

Henkutsu-san placed his hand together a few seconds ---

"How about 'Pure Magic Destructive Killing Wave'?"

…What is the difference?

Ah, sorry. This is only an outsider's opinion (me), actually I had no idea if there was any difference….

The next part of our conversation was between Kuroneko and that editor about naming (I didn't notice any different between all the names they came up with). Because all of this was a meaningless topic (my personal opinion only), so I really wanted to find another editor and asked about 'Maisora'. But since today, the main character is Kuroneko, and she was focusing on her conversation with Henkutsu-san, so I couldn't interrupt them.

When they had a slight pause, I took that chance and interrupted them:

"Sorry, but what kind of person our editor is?"

"Er? Ah…his nickname here among us is 'Puurin.

"What a cute nickname"

Could it be that we had female editor? An image of big breast office lady entered my head.

"Everyone thought so at first too! But you were wrong. You will definitely scream when you see him!"

"I see…"

"…Why would we scream?"

Kuroneko asked in confusion.

"Haha, because --- "

Henkutsu-san spoke in a low voice and raised a hand, like he was telling us a horror story.

At the same time, someone appeared behind him.

"He looked like Akuma[9]."

"..Sorry I'm late. I'm Puurin. Please to meet you."

He introduced himself in a deep voice. What a precisely timing.

Henkutsu-san noticed this too, he 'Wow' and turned back, then immediately bowed:

"Sorry! I didn't know that you were behind me."

"It's fine…I'm used to it."

He was an elder man with white hair that looked like fire.

Just like Henkutsu-san said, he really looked like that hidden character in that fighting game. Even I knew it too.

He had deep-set eyes, his face had wrinkled and his skin was dark. But unlike Akuma, he was incredibly thin almost like a sick person, but his eyes were sharp, so he gave off quite a pressure.

My father's face was like a gangster too, but this man – forgive my rudeness – he had an inhuman terrified aura

To tell the truth, I could feel him faintly emitted killing intent.

Yet his nickname is Puurin, Puurin! What the heck…? Who, who gave him that cute nickname? Don't tell me he picked it himself.

"…Please to meet you, I'm Kousaka."

"Please to meet you."

Both Kuroneko and I were terrified, but we still bowed and greeted him politely.

Then, as expected, Puurin-san spoke in a tone like it came from the deepest part of hell "Same here…" and nodded.

After Puurin-san sat down, Henkutsu-san stood up.

"I'm going back to my work now, do your best ~."

Left that encouraging words behind, he quickly get out .

Eh?For real? Next --- Are we going to have a talk with this Puurin-san? Don't do that! Don't leave us behind? Why do I feel like I was left behind on a sacrificial altar?

"…Something wrong? *Stare*"

"Nothing!" *Shock*

Our eyes met for a second; then, I immediately looked away. Damn! This is definitely not good! How could I ask about 'Maisora' and 'Kumagai Ryuunosuke' from that clearly hard-approached person?

I simply had no way at all ~~! I should have asked Henkutsu-san instead! Damn, what should I do!

Feeling troubled, I looked aside and meet Kuroneko's eyes. She probably looked away for the same reason as me. Even Kuroneko had no way to face this man.

"I have to do this…"

Kuroneko muttered, like she was talking to herself. Then she turned forward and timidly asked:

"…Sorry, did you see the doujinshi that I sent a few days ago?"

"I had seen them…all the references too."

Puurin-san favored short and direct words, while Kuroneko always spoke in a low tone, so when they spoke it gave a depressed feeling. I could almost see a black air rising. In this case, two negative didn't make a positive.

"This is a photocopy of the novel and the reference."

Puurin-san threw a pack of A4 papers on the table. There were three packs in total; each was kept together by a small clip.

….There was my share too…but I never read any of them…

I looked down at my pack and felt a bit guilty. I should have read them before.

While at the same time, Puurin-san looked at the note on the table – the same one that Henkutsu-san just wrote.

"Brother and sister wrote it together…the little sister is the main writer, penname 'Kuroneko'…right?"

"Yes."

"Kuroneko-san, are you planning to become a novelist ? I saw that you also made a manga within that doujinshi …"

Puurin-san didn't pay me any attention, he only asked Kuroneko that.

Probably his trained eyes already saw that I'm only a ' decoration'.

"…I…."

Kuroneko gripped the hem of her skirt tightly and looked down.

Then she tried to spoke her feeling:

"…I like both writing novel and drawing manga. If possible, I'd like to try both…but today I came here to contribute my novel."

"I understand. Then, can I take it as you are planning to make your debut here?"

"Yes."

"Good. Then…I will begin our discussion with that as our base foundation."

They began their peaceful conversation, just like between a doctor and a patient.

"Please tell me about your experience in amateur novelist competition."

"I send my application every year to your company."

"How many years exactly? Have you tried sending it to other company?"

"Three years in total. Aside from your company, I also applied in MF and SD amateur novelist competition, but I have never made it till the final round."

"I see…Although you are still young, that's good."

"I'm still inexperience….thank you for your compliment."

……..I can't take it anymore.

What is with that heavy atmosphere? Henkutsu-san, can you please come back here?

Since I had nothing to do, I began to look around. This room was separated by a partition, with numerous cabinets and paper boxes acted as a wall prevent me from seeing anything.

We were inside a workshop, but it looked like we were at a small room.

And since we were speaking with a terrifying looking man, it gave the feeling that we were being held in an interrogation room.

"It's rare to see someone so young yet participate every year. Is there any reason for you to do that?"

"...Just like I said, I really like writing novel…But to tell the truth, I also wanted to earn money. A novel's royalty is much better than my current part time job's

salary, not to mention that it could improve my family's income."

That was the first time I heard the reason Kuroneko wanted to become a novelist. Although during Summer Comiket, I had overheard a bit…maybe her family's wasn't as rich as I thought.

She had to work part time in order to enjoy her hobby too…huh? Both Kirino and this girl are only in middle school, but they were amazing. As their senior, I should learn from them.

"…..Do you think that is an impure reason?"

Hearing Kuroneko asked that, Puurin-san stayed silence. Then…

"No."

Just one word. Somehow I felt that Puurin-san was angry since the beginning.

Could it be that was because he heard Henkutsu-san described him 'looked like Akuma'? Ugh, such bad luck.

The conversation continued in a heavy atmosphere… They kept talking about this topic.

"Uhm, about your manuscript, after I read it, my opinion is…."

Thud…I could almost hear Kuroneko's heartbeat.

"This isn't worth discussing."

Puurin-san told us the result directly.

"I think this is understandable, since you never pass the amateur's competition, of course you couldn't make something that could be published. Also, we are having this conversation only because I own someone a debt. Although saying this might be too much, but if you thought that you would receive special treatment because of that connection, you are completely wrong. Otherwise, that would be too rude toward those who took part in our amateur completion."

"…I understand. Today, I felt embarrassed too for asking this unreasonable request of you."

Kuroneko whispered her apology. Hearing that, my stomach twisted.

Because she came here since she agreed to my request to help Kirino.

It wasn't like I don't understand Puurin-san hated Kuroneko since he thought she used her connection to get this meeting, but I should be the one to listen to that – yet I mustn't explain everything now.

If I did, all of Kuroneko's effort until now would be in vain.

"This is the only time I agreed for a meeting using connections. Next time, please send your manuscript normally like the others. Then…about the content…."

"…Yes…"

"…There is an interesting point during this character's conversation. Especially about that character that doesn't appear in the original Maschera called Kirino…After I read it, my head is full of her. She is so moe…."

That damn old man. Look how old you are, what are you saying moe for? With your tone and face….Of course I knew that this was his job, but this character is based on my little sister! Damn it, now I remembered what I forgot . Wasn't it that the doujinshi had a sex slave scene? Kuroneko, please don't send them that.

"But…I don't really like that character…."

"Is that so…so unfortunate. But I feel that aside from Kirino, all the other character didn't leave a good impression since there were too many of them. Of course adding many characters isn't a bad thing, but it looks like you still haven't mastered this technique. Aside from that over complicated setup, the over the top description – it might be a little hard to hear, but this turned into a self-satisfied novel…That kind of novel, I really doubt it could passed a second examination. Even if this is a doujinshi based on something else, this wasn't good. It's far from something that could be sold."

Hearing Puurin say such heavy criticisms in such a nonchalantly way, Kuroneko paled even more than usual .

At first, she could counter by saying 'If we change it like this…' or 'Here, it's not…' or 'Power of Darkness is an important aspect that I created, so…'. However, all of them was rebuked with 'This is only your opinions, the reader don't care about them. It's only making it more difficult to read' and 'Its fine if you expressed yourself in writing, but there is something more important, isn't it?'. Faced with the cruel logic, she slowly lost the will to fight back.

"…That was all I need to say about it in general. Next I will talk about each part…I will begin from the first page, please look at the photocopy in your hand."

This time, Puurin-san made many harsh criticisms with each and every word. The photocopy in his hand had each of its page covered in red.

Could it be…all of them were Kuroneko's novel's 'weak point'? Is he going to list them all?

Time continued. I and Kuroneko had no choice but to grit our teeth and endured those harsh criticisms.

Ten minutes. Twenty minutes.

One hour. Three hours…Finally.

Kuroneko still looked down and listened, but

"….*Snob…snob…snob*!"

"How dare you make my little sister cry! Must you say it that way? It was too much! She is just a middle school girl!"

Hearing Kuroneko's silent cry, my anger suddenly rose – I unconsciously roared.

Not to mention that I even stood up and slammed on the table.

"….."

Facing my outburst, Puurin-san wasn't affected at all. Without saying a single word, he took a cloth and wiped the tea that was spilled on the table because I slammed on it earlier.

Seeing him act like that, I came back to my senses. Because I just shouted, everyone must have heard it by now. They are probably on their way here to see what is going on.

I felt so bad. The thought that Kuroneko must be thinking the same made me wanted to disappear.

"…Kuh!"

Ahh damn it! What a disgrace! He talked to us in a professional way, but we treated him so rude. True, he was harsh, but what's wrong with pointing out the weak point of a story? Telling on the good thing will never help the author to improve. He wasn't our teacher at school or family member; he was talking with us in an equal position, telling us how to work right. We should have listened to him earnestly.

…But I couldn't stop myself from shouting.

That was her story, something he put all of her effort into. Yet he firmly said it 'isn't worth discussing'. Even if it was true, it hurt to hear that.

Kuroneko was the same as Kirino. Such a big doujinshi , she must have put all of her effort into it.

But he ---

"Nii-san."

Suddenly, Kuroneko's gentle voice made my heart, which was burning with anger calmed down. That gentle voice was the same when she spoke with her little sister. She pulled my sleeves.

Probably wanting me to sit down.

Kuroneko used her sleeves to wipe her tears and looked at me with her moist eyes:

"I'm fine…Thank you for getting angry because of me. "

"…Is…is that so?"

Her beautiful face with a hint of tears made my heart skipped a beat. She…she is a beautiful girl after all, I just fail to notice it…almost forgot it. But seeing her crying face made my heart raced – am I a pervert? She is still a middle school girl!

"…I'm very sorry, as long as it's something about his little sister, Nii-san easily lose his calm."

"…I'm sorry too, suddenly shouting like that."

Hey hey, I'm not losing my calm…Although I thought that, but I still bowed together with Kuroneko

"It's fine…I don't mind it at all."

Thankfully Puurin-san forgave me, he didn't looked like he cared.

"How about a little break?"

…With an emotionless voice, Puurin-san said that and stood up. Since he left with a wet cloth in his hand, he was probably on his way to wash it.

"…That was… embarrassing."

Kuroneko spoke in a hesitating tone. This was the first time I saw she acted so honest.

"…Because of me, now it's even harder to ask about Kumagai Ryuunosuke…."

"No, I was at fault too…if it wasn't because of me, you won't….Sorry."

Both of us apologized. We could only spoke our true feeling now.

There was a strange feeling in my guts. There shouldn't be many things to say between us, but somehow we could understand what each other was thinking. What is going on?

An unknown uncomfortable time passed…

Then Puurin-san returned. Somehow, he brought a tray with him.

"Please enjoy…"

With such a short line, he left the tray with tea and snack on the table.

"Please enjoy yourself…."

"I see…"

He…what is he going to do? What is he thinking? He didn't get angry, did he…?

Right in front of our surprised eyes, Puurin-san sat down like it's nothing. With the same Devil-like face, he calmly took a spoon of pudding and put it into his mouth . After devouring it, he slowly nodded:

"Pudding tasted good. It could improve your mood."

…..Eh? Both me and Kuroneko looked at each other's. Could it be that this guy….

"…Is he trying to encourage us?"

"…I'm no good when it's come to talking…sorry."

A corner of his mouth raised – a terrifying smile appeared. Although his smile could make a kid faint… but I felt like he was encouraging us.

That's right. Although he was harsh when giving his opinions, his appearance looked like a devil, but he wasn 't a bad man. He wasn't a bad man at all ---

"Ahaha…could it be…Puurin-san, you had that nickname because you like pudding?"

"Yes…because pudding look like breast."

---- He is just a perverted old man!

Puurin-san kept tapping the tray and looked at the pudding with a satisfied expression.

"…Don't you think that it will calm you down? Our manager told us to eat five puddings in under ten seconds."

If that's how you hope to calm us down, then you failed miserably.

"…..Nii-san…He is…nuts.

"Quite. What if he heard us…."

Seeing the pervert ceremony of a cult happened in front of our eyes, I and Kuroneko whispered to each other.

To tell the truth, we were so scared that we wanted to run away…But the end result was that the heavy atmosphere was blown away. So…thanks to that action, Puurin-san made himself to be more approachable.

After finished his meal, Puurin-san clapped his hand together and said 'I'm done'.

"Then, let's continue our talk from earlier. I want to talk about the development later."

"…Later?"

I could see that Kuroneko choose a completely defensive style. Probably because she felt uneasy since she didn't know what would he said.

"Yes…I meant…the next part of this doujinshi."

"Eh? The next?"

Kuroneko's eyes widened. She asked again:

"That…didn't you just say that my doujinshi wasn't worth discussing? And you said this meeting would be the last?"

"That's right. After reading your manuscript, I have to apologize. I couldn't take the responsible of becoming your editor. Like I said before, no matter how much you wanted to publish your work, please took part in as any amateur writers. Use your own strength instead of rely

on connections. Otherwise, that's no good in the long run ."

"Yes…I know."

When I thought he would end our meeting here – suddenly Puurin-san continued: "However…"

"I still welcome you if you brought another manuscript. But this is only my personal suggestion, I will not give you any special treatment, nor can I promise that your manuscript will be published here. If you can accept that..No, if you aren't afraid to repeat what happened today again…."

Then you have to prepare yourself to face another harsh criticism.

This must be what he meant.

Kuroneko – she took a deep breath, nodded and said " I understand…"

"…Please take care of me later."

"…Me too. However, in your current state, even if I said it in a polite way, your work's standard is still low,

thus don't get your hope up and neglected your homework and study. The number of writers who succeed in writing is actually not that high. For example, I once took care of a writer – he need ten years to make his debut; yet he could disappear at any moment if his book failed to attract the reader…I hope you could treasure your life."

Puurin-san repeated his harsh words, then he looked down.

…That meant…

"..Do you mean that my chance to debut at your company is rather low?"

"That's right."

He said 'that's right'! He just made her cry a moment before! Looked like the word 'politely speaking' wasn't included in his dictionary!

"However…That's not all I wanted to say, and while I don't know if I could express myself clearly enough…but I think that 'wannabe' writers like Kuroneko-san

consider make a debut their top priority. Allow me to say one thing based from my job experience: debuting is just the beginning, it's not an end."

Then he paused for a second.

"After making a debut, how you live everyday will be completely changed. First, you will have to deal with the deadline, new knowledge and new material. You will be so busy what you don't have time to processing them, but at the same time you can't stop writing. This is something that only you could experience yourself to understand. Even if you couldn't become a writer…to be able to find something that you want to do and do it is not totally meaningless. This might a bit too much and might anger other writers – but should you wait until you retire in your work and make your debut with your life experience, I think it's still not too late."

This is a harsh experience, something only an old man could say.

She clearly said she wanted to become a writer now, but he suggested waiting near forty years later.

Just from this, I concluded that he is like a granny, always make thing more complicated.

But still, he only said that because he hoped the best for us, not because of his work. Although I'm still angry with him, still praying that he get a heart attack and die right now…I still agree that he is trustworthy.

Puurin-san looked at Kuroneko:

"After our talk just now, do you think that I said all of this to make you give up on your dream of becoming a writer?"

"Yes. I got the feeling that you were patronizing me and said 'I will not harm you, find something else to do, because you got no talent at all'. It made me quite unhappy."

This girl answered 'Yes'! She even said that he patronizing her and made her unhappy. Although I got the same feeling, that wasn't something you could just speak out! How could you be aggressive toward anyone? Where is the girl who quietly sat here and listened just now? Did she die?

"Hahaha, I made you unhappy because I patronizing you?"

Puurin-san heard Kuroneko's answered and broke into laughter.

Scary! I think he is really angry now….

"Ah – sorry. I really liked to be lectured. With my age, it's rare to meet someone who will lecture me, so even I don't know myself…"

"I think so too."

Kuroneko's nasty words didn't stop, she totally reverted back to her normal personality.

"Then I will ended this lecture with patronize way. Kuroneko-san – please treasure your 'wannabe' self. No matter if you became a writer or not, if there is something that makes you want to become a writerto earn money or not,I think that there are other things that you want to do , right? You're still young, that's why you should have various experiences, see various things, and enjoy your life. I think that's a good shortcut to becoming a writer. It 's a matter of your own future, so please think about it slowly and carefully.

"…Thank you for your advice, I will try my best."

She totally said something she doesn't want to say. Although it sounded like the normal Kuroneko, I got a bad feeling about this.

"I will try my best to live up to an old man's suggestion."

Puurin-san rebuked:

"Then please take this. This is my email address and phone number, please use that to contact me."

He gave us his card. Kuroneko took that, her eyes widened, her body froze.

"Onii…Nii-san…this ---"

"What…is wrong?"

Seeing Kuroneko's strange reaction, I took a look at the card.

Media ASC II Work, second department, Dengeki Bunko Editorial Department.

"Eh? Wait a second…this name ---"

I was totally in chaos and did a double take at this card .

"…Is something unclear?"

Puurin-san seemed to misunderstand the reason we acted this way.

"Allow me to reintroduce myself. My nickname is Puurin, my name is Kumagai Ryuunosuke, please to meet you…"

He told us why his 'nickname' and his 'name on the card' were different.

A few days later, we returned to Media Asc II Work's meeting room. This was a room at the fifth floor, right above the second department. There were sofas that surrounded a long table, a small tree in the corner, thus this place gave off a feeling like a meeting room. Based on what Puurin-san said, this was a room used when they gathered for a meeting or had an interview.

Among the fifth floors, there were some rooms that looked like karaoke room.

And we were inside one of them. At the moment, I and Kuroneko was the only one here, we were sitting on the sofa and waited.

Maybe that the soundproof wall was very good, everything was quite. I could probably hear a pin dropped here.

"Say, there is no need for you to come with me."

"Nii-san…this is the third time you said that."

Kuroneko looked forward and answered without turning her head. There was no one here, but she kept calling me 'Nii-san'. Even Kirino never called me this way, so when Kuroneko called me that, I felt a bit uncomfortable.

"I had mistakenly board a pirate ship. Now it had become like this, are you going to leave me out?"

"That is not what I meant…"

"Also, I hate the person who gave me that unhappy memory. I want to see the moment they fired her. It's fine if I kick her once or twice right?"

"It's not fine. Don't do that."

Her words were filled with tiredness and resentment.

She clearly held a grunge for more than four hours of merciless criticism.

That meeting…even now I could still remembered it, not to mention last night I even had a dream…could it be that every editor was that way too?

This part is not good. This should be left out. Here doesn't feel logical ---

So noisy ~ damn it! Now it became totally different from the original writing! Damn it! Why don't you write it instead – then I threw the manuscript at their face.

Of course I couldn't do it in real life.

Well, it's not possible to make something that would please everyone.

That was true no matter that you were a police officer, a Japanese sweets maker, or a writer.

--- Since there was a bit of time left, let me explain our current situation.

So Puurin-san is the same 'Kumagai Ryuunosuke' that we are looking for.

Thankfully, because of Kuroneko's nasty tongue, we easily explained everything about him. About another reason for us to came here.

When we showed him 'Kumagai Ryuunosuke's card', he himself acknowledge that this is his card. Seemed that he had a different set of business cards for the Dengeki Books Editorial Department and the Mobile Phone Division.Also, based on his explanation, the Mobile Phone Division was created for the sake of public image, and that the staff belonging to it was essentially the same as the staff at the Dengeki Books Editorial Department. They operated out of the same place, and the same editors worked there

My explanation might not be very clear, so allowed me to quote him directly :

"This is quite a secret, but if I had to put it bluntly, I would say that it's a strategy to maintain our public

image. The target audience for cell phone novels is young women, so we have to try to hide the moe moe sides of the business. So, the mobile division might have the same staff as Dengeki Books, but we say to the public that it's a separate department. The public homepages of the two departments also don't mention each other. That's why we use different business cards for each side of the business… I apologize if that confused you."

That was basically it. We originally decided to use Saori's connection with Dengeki Bunko to see if we could meet that 'Kumagai Ryuunosuke' of Mobile Division. But it turned out we didn't have to, because he was sitting right in front of us. Not to mention that the 'Kumagai Ryuunosuke' that we meet at the department was a scary-looking old man, completely different from the suit-wearing, young-looking male that I saw.

In other words, the Kumagai Ryuunosuke that Kirino meet was a fake. That result was enough to gave us a shock.

"Still, where did you get that card?"

"Yes, actually we came here to ask you about this…."

I told him the reason regard 'Maisora'. But of course, you guy must understand that someone as cowardly as me couldn't possibly tell him immediately 'someone stole it from another'. Instead I asked him about the author of this.

"Ah, ah, you want to ask about the author? This is someone I just told you about, Rino-sensei who only made her debut after ten years. Recently, the phone novel that she wrote, well, it simply felt like it was written by a completely different person, very interesting – to tell the truth, I was very surprised when I found out that she could write something like that. Of course, I was also surprised because after so many years, I never found out about her skill. To think that she took that long, maybe it's because of my incompetence. Actually…I was both surprised and regretful…Ah…her novel this time is definitely going to be famous!"

Kumagai-san said full of excitement. He must be very happy because after so long, the writer he took care of had gained successful.

On the other hand, I am totally convinced that 'Rino' is the thief.

"What is Rino-sensei like?"

"Ah, um – actually …"

--- Anyway, that's all about it. We were going to get to the next part right now.

The door opened, then Kumagai-san entered, followed by someone else.

Right after that person saw us on the sofa, that person blinked a few times.

" –Eh?"

It was hard to guess that person's gender based on voice alone, but that voice was very clear. That person turned out to be a short-hair woman in blue pant and suit. She looked quite intelligent, and there was a mole under her left eyes. If I had to guess, she was about twenty, with a very tall body and a nearly flat chest. If it wasn't because of the makeup and her earring, she could be easily mistaken for a good looking male, but now she looked like a female manager.

"…Kumagai-san, aren't we going to have a talk about the second volume of 'Maisora' today? Is this the wrong room?"

"No, we are at the right place. Let me introduce you, this is Kousaka-san and Kuroneko-san, they had something very important to talk with you Fate-chan."

Fate…Fate-Chan?

"Kumagai-san, I beg of you, please don't call me Fate-chan anymore. My penname is 'Rino' now, please call me that!"

…So this is 'Rino'. She called herself that without any change in her tone, her expression right in front of us…. The image if my sick little sister popped up in my head and made my blood boiled.

But now wasn't the time to let my anger show.

I suppressed my rage and stood up to greet her.

"Please to meet you."

"….Please to meet you."

Next to me, Kuroneko did the same. The woman called Fate (I don't want to call her 'Rino') greeted us with a confused expression.

"Ah, please to meet you too…I'm Rino…About… Kumagai-san?"

"Ah, just sit down and listen to them."

"…I don't mind. Ah, I know, you must be here to get more reference right? But I just got an interview…Could it be that you like the web version that much?"

She happily sat down in front of us. By the way, Kumagai-san was still stood at the door, emitted a faint killing intent .

"Then just ask anything you like ~ are you two brother and sister? Your little sister looked so cute."

"….Yeah yeah, right right….."

Could we manage to expose her mask during the time we had? Of course we had prepared a plan…But this wasn't enough to totally prove that she stole someone else's work. Whether we successes in taking back Kirino' s novel or not is depended on our action.

Kuroneko made the first move:

“Can I ask you something?”

“Of course!Anything!”

She happily replied, totally into her ‘serving fan’ mode .

Kuroneko opened her mouth, when I was wondering where she would start her attack ---

“Why are you called Fate-chan?”

She started from there? Although I was a bit curious myself.

That woman’s face twisted, and then slowly turned into an unpleasant scold. Although she quickly changed back, but anyone can see that was a forced smile. Looked like this was a touchy subject for her, but she deserved it.

“…My full name is Fate Iori Setsuna.”

“..You meant that was your previous pen name?”

Kuroneko suddenly threw a curved ball, now let's see how that woman reached…

"That was…my real name."

--- What did…you say?

"…What did you just say?"

"I said Fate Iori Setsuna is my real name! Unbelievable , right? People always said it was like a name from anime or light novel! But this can't be helped, that was what my parents named me! I'm three quarter Japanese! I knew that name is ridiculous…Is there any problem with that? "

"….But I think that name is cool…."

Are you for real? Your face is full of admiration!

Kuroneko's eyes shone, her cheeks reddened, her breathing ragged. Looked like that name Fate Iori Setsuna really fired her up.

"…Can I call you Fate-chan too?"

"You can't! You…you…were you even listening to me ?"

Kuroneko was making that woman angry. Although I didn't feel that she did it on purpose, but that gave me a bit of satisfaction.

Good. Keep going.

"Really – didn't I just tell you Kumagai-san? Please call me 'Rino'. This is my pen name from now on."

"Can't do that. I will not call you 'Rino'."

It would be a waste of time to keep up with this farce, I decided now was the time. I told this straight to Fate's face.

"Because you aren't the author of 'Maisora'."

"..What? What are you talking about?"

Fate titled her head in confusion. Facing my question, she didn't even waver, completely acting oblivious! Damn, seemed like I wasn't good with talking….

Kuroneko snorted “hmm”, like she was saying ‘this guy is so useless’ then her expression changed into ‘leave everything to me, step aside’ before turned to face Fate and began her nasty verbal attack:

“…Stop pretending, you damn insect. You are to look down on me, low-life? Are you still trying to anger me now?”

Kuroneko-san, was that a bit too much?

Calling her an insect in a cursed-filled voice? If that was me, I would be crying already!

“Hey hey, be quite for a second.”

For Kuroneko, this was her very normal way of talking , while I was used to it, thus all I thought was ‘again huh’ …But you had to notice the other's expression too! Since your words were too much, they didn’t know how to reach!

“What…what did you say?”

“Nothing.Nothing at all. I just said that you stole ‘ Maisora’. Am I wrong?”

I agreed that my method of interrogation was too soft, it didn't feel like I could be a detective.

"Kuma – Kumagai-san! What is going on with those two? They are calling me a thief --!"

Fate pointed her finger at us and stood up. When she spoke to Kumagai-san in such anger-filled voice, he calmly replied:

"…According to them, 'Maisora' was something written by his little sister, before you stole its manuscript. Not only that, you even pretend to be me."

Kumagai-san took the card with Fate's phone number and email address and put it on the table. Seeing that, she said:

"And you believe that?"

"….That wasn't the issue right now, but that is my card for sure. And the contact information on that was Fate-chan's. Of course, that didn't mean anything, but this case was different from the others, so I called Fate-chan here."

"How could that be? Kumagai-san, even you don't trust me too?"

Fate yelled. If Kumagai-san truly believed his writer is innocent, he should have told her that beforehand. She must be thinking this way.

The editor that she had worked for a long time didn't trust her.

That desperate yell might not be a fake. Even if she was my enemy, I couldn't help but feel a bit of remorse.

"No, we begged Kumagai-san for ten minutes meeting with Fate-chan, and we also asked him to not mention this to you."

"I told you don't call me Fate!"

Seemed like she really hated that name. Although her voice and expression were full of anger, I wasn't afraid of it one bit. Kumagai-san said without changing his expression:

"…I only want to make this clear. I myself of course hope that act of stealing is nothing but a lie. Fate-chan, if you could prove your innocent, this would be much

simplier. I will strongly give them a warning and forbid them from entering here again. I told you before, I did this because of my responsible as your editor."

That was what he really thought. After hearing what we said and our evidences, Kumagai-san gave us that chance…but he wasn't on our side. Between a writer that he had been taken care of for a long time and two brats that he just meet, it's clear who he trusted more.

"…I understand, Kumagai-san…Then it can't be help. I will play along with them."

Hearing her editor said that, Fate turned calm again.

"Then let's hear what you have to say. So – how? You said I stole someone else's manuscript? I want to end this conversation as fast as possible, so let's get to the point. Do you have any proof?"

Tch…I knew that she would resorted to this.

That woman took Kirino's website and gained control of all the manuscript inside, then she posted all of them in the Internet.

Because of that, she erased all the evidences that proof Kirino was Maisora's author.

What a cunning scheme.

"I will make it clear, I steal nothing. Maisora is mine. If you said that I stole it but can't prove any evidences, you must have prepared yourself, right?"

"Kuh…"

No, I can't give up now. Yes, all the evidence on the Internet had been erased, but…When I was searching in my bag for evidences, Fate narrowed her eyes and turned to Kuroneko:

"And you, little girl, what is with you? Is your mouth always that nasty? Do you think I will forgive that?"

"Fool. Why should I show respect to a thief? A useless, crappy wannabe writer that unable to make a debut for ten years, do you think that you are good now? You just stole some crappy manuscript someone else wrote and think that you are a good author now? What a joke. Say, do you think that there is any reason for you to continue living in this world?"

"Don't screw with me! Do you have proof or not? Yes or no? What exactly is your answer?"

"Hm – now that was your true color, right? Idiot. I was wondering what would you say, but 'Do you have proofs or not?'. Hm hm…whoever said that almost always turned out to be guilty. Hmhm…your death is coming close…Come…Die in my arms…."

Are you a Demon King? Go back to Alefgard, damn it!

If that was a nasty-speaking contest, then Kuroneko would won for sure.

Hopefully that she remembered that the real reason we were here was about Kirino.

Seeing that Kuroneko unrelenting pride, Fate seemed to be taken back and unsure what to do. However – a moment later, her whole body's feature changed.

"Your name is…Kuroneko, right? This is my advice for you from the bottom of my heart, hurry and give up on that ridiculous way of speaking. Because someday, you will want to kill that past self."

She said softly, her expression looked like she saw a bad omen.

The way she countered our accusations of thief made her looked like a completely different person. I got the feeling she was like an adult talking to a child, like someone talk to their past self.

" --- Thank you for your unnecessary concern."

Kuroneko's expression changed into an unpleasant one, like she was forced to see something she didn't want to, like she was seeing her ugly self on a mirror.

But a second later, that expression changed into a mocking one.

She glanced at me then smiled with Fate:

"…Tell her, doctor Watson. Let that criminal who thought that she had cleared all evidences saw our prepared effort."

"Who are you calling Watson?!"

Ha …finally it's the main topic. I was a bit nervous, but due to Jakigan detective-sama, I quietly took the

evidences out. Actually, it was just Kirino's phone and her notebook.

"…Are you saying that there is a note inside? But that ---"

"See for yourself. This is the evidence that proof my little sister is the author of 'Maisora'."

I gave the notebook and the phone to Fate. Inside, there were references, outline that she made. That Christmas Eve, we visited Shibuya – we went to 109, we bought things at the accessory shop, we visited a concert, then she suddenly dumped a bucket of cold water on herself, we went to a love hotel for reference – everything .

That was the evidence that proof Kirino is the author of 'Maisora'.

By the way, Kumagai-san had seen them all. If Fate torn it up or broke the cell phone, the only things she did was admitted that she was guilty. But she must also understand something so simple. Then she suddenly narrowed her eyes.

I thought that notebook would make her nervous, but she pointed at a page and asked:

"What is with that strange illustration? Is that a terrifying looking Yaranaio?"

"That wasn't what I want you to see! Look at what was written in the middle! And that illustration…probably me."

Ah, among of Kirino's references were the illustration of me in anger, confusion, almost crying..she even wrote her opinions next to it.

Well, to tell the truth it's understandable that she thought it was strange. Because it indeed was.

Not to mention about her opinions…

–>That idiot when he apologized to the shopkeeper after not having enough money to pay for an accessory (^0^).

^ "Sorry I don't have enough money," he said! Haha! So gross! (lol)

<– I made him buy me earrings. I let the idiot choose one himself, but he has no sense at all and spent such a long time! (^^;)

^ The idiot got really angry when I got all wet (>_<) How much of a siscon is he?!

<– The idiot bad thought seeing his little sister in a bathrobe. Nuuuuu, is Kiririn's chastity in danger?!

Wow ----! I want to kill her! Just remembering that made me want to kill her ~~!!!!

And what is with that curly handwriting? It pissed me off! Each of them hit me when it hurt the most!

And what the heck? I'm the one who was showing the evidence, why am I so pissed off?

I only wanted to show the outline and references, not Kirino's picture about me!

"…That was what she took for reference when she wrote 'Maisora'. There were pictures she took that Christmas Eve on the phone too."

"……."

Fate remained silence and checked the references that Kirino took.

"Hm…You think that this could be evidence?"

"Of..of course."

"I have checked them all – true, not bad, but all of them were just a middle school girl reference ~ ah, I know I know. Now I understand why do you believe that your little sister is the author of Maisora just with that. Because you are a siscon."

Fate smiled then returned Kirino's notebook and phone to me:

"—So what? What can it prove?"

"That…."

"That is just your little sister's imagination after reading 'Maisora'."

Hearing that woman's shameless boast, I felt hot stream came out of my head ---

"Cough cough…."

Someone elbowed me in the stomach. Seeing my reaction, Kuroneko quickly stopped me. Looked like after my outburst at Kumagai-san's office, she could somehow predicted my action/

With a perfectly calm voice, she said:

" --- What about the date of those pictures? Each of them was taken at Shibuya that night."

"Who knows? I don't know much about cell phone, but isn't it easy to fake it? Or it could be just a coincidence…"

"You said it's a coincidence?"

"Yes, maybe it's the truth? Yes, your little sister must have taken some pictures at Shibuya that night, then after she found out that the background of 'Maisora' and her pictures was the same, she said 'I'm Maisora's author !'. Then, because you are an idiot to like his little sister, you two trust her and totally ignored other people's discomfort and came here. Ahaha, how stupid.How foolish!"

Fate gave Kuroneko a mocking laughter:

"Ahaha, that's how troublesome middle age schoolgirl is, always bring troubles for adult. If you want to satisfy your delusion, just do it inside your room."

"----------"

The light in Kuroneko's eyes disappeared, her black iris somehow had turned red again.

"Nomobuyowoshihashitawadokeda…"

"Stop your chanting! I don't know what you are trying to do, but stop immediately!"

From behind, I stood up and stop Kuroneko from chanting an unknown spell.

Could she stay calm for a second! She was so easy to get taunted.

And she was so damn strong! Was that what they called placebo effect?

"Release me, Nii-san, I won't kill that woman."

"Stop this at once!"

I tried my best to restrain Kuroneko while yelled at Fate:

"Don't fucking speak nonsense! My little sister isn't that naïve ---! If she indeed make that up, I myself will teach her a lesson!"

Of course I couldn't do it in reality, but at least I could say something to Kirino – in my heart anyway.

"…You are the one who should stop speaking nonsense…I have had enough, I don't want to see you anymore."

Fate threw us a pained glance then announced in a mocking tone:

"Anyway…unless you have something else to say, we are done here. It had been 30 minutes, I don't have that much free time to playing around with you. Can I go, Kumagai-san?"

"…You are right."

Without changing his expression, Kumagai-san nodded once. As I already said, he had seen them all. He also said – "that wasn't enough'. He was indeed on Fate's side, so we had nothing to say about that.

However --

"I still have a critical evidence right here!"

I tried to boast and pulled out my final trump card.

That was a stack of A4-size paper.

"Kousaka-san, this is…?"

"Maisora – the sequel, Kumagai-san. My little sister wrote that."

Ha ~ to tell the truth, I was surprised too when I saw this.

Although we need a plan to retake what was hers, we didn't tell Kirino this.

So getting this evidence was quite a challenge. Just like a certain someone sneaked into her brother's room, when Kirino went downstairs to eat, I sneaked into her room. Because most of the time, she either slept in her room or had it locked. Uhm…if she found out, my life will probably be forfeit. Although I was doing this to help my little sister, the feeling of guilt should be enough to crush me.

What am I doing…really…

But that paid off quite well. When I stole that notebook from her, I found out about the sequel of Maisora. Because of that, I kept looking until I found another notebook.

Inside, I found the password for 'Work use' and ' Personal use'. Both were used to access that 'Cell phone club'. But the one for 'Work use' was unable, always gave me a 'wrong password' respond.

In short, 'Work use' website is the where Maisora was kept, the one that Fate stole.

About the 'Personal use' website, there was the rape novel (that Kuroneko called) and 'Maisora another side: Little sister's point of view'. After I gave it a quick check, I found out that was something written from the main character's little sister's point of view. So, it could be called a sequel. Back then, Kirino said little sister was a very important character, she was telling the truth.

Basically, it was like this:

Kirino spitted 'Work use' and 'Personal use' into different part of a site, and the part which held Maisora – the 'Work use' part was stolen by Fate.

But the 'Personal Use' part kept the sequel of Maisora, or another version of that.

The truth is, even I myself was wondering 'why does something like this exist'. Because Kirino was ordered by Kumagai-san to write something with Rino as the main character. Why should she write the sequel for a book that hadn't finished yet – that was my unanswered question.

Maybe it's not that simple. But the truth remained that she wanted to write this.

Anyway --

"Just now, Fa – Satsuna-san said, today she came here for a discussion about the sequel of Maisora, right? In short, Kumagai-san, you have seen the sequel of Maisora that Setsuna-san wrote, right?"

"Yes, I did."

Kumagai-san answered. Fate paled and began counterattack:

"So..so what of it?"

"So – we could know just by reading two version. Then which one is the real one and which one is the fake will be clear. Am I wrong?"

"Are you saying that the one is better is the real one? That's just your personal opinion! How could you decide real or fake with that ---"

"Ha, in other words, you have no confidence haven't you?"

I summoned my courage and mimicked the way Kirino and Kuroneko talked to taunt her.

"…….What are you saying?"

"You don't hear me? How many times do you want me to repeat myself – after ten years of training, finally Rino-sensei had became a professional writer, but she doesn't has confidence that she could beat a phone novel that a middle school girl wrote."

That was actually a very big bet. Because she could refuse to take my taunt, or the 'Maisora sequel' she wrote could be better than Kirino. If that was the case, we are doomed.

However, although I'm an outsider, I knew nothing about novels, but I thought that …

No matter how unlikeable the character that Kirino created, or the premise and story filled with overly-convenient events, or the overly-idealistic, delusional love-filled conversation between Rino and Toshi ---

All of them born from Kirino's heart, all of them belonged to her. She had put all she had into this, going as far as bringing the elder brother that she hated the most to get references. So her novel must had reflected her life experience until now.

She had to stop working on her modeling, had to stop her club activities to write and write and write – to finish this. That's why it was so welcomed by the females, that' s why so many people liked it.

And so ---

"Because I believe that the story written by the real author will never lose to a fake."

Now is the time to decide a winner.

Kirino's manuscript and Fate's manuscript. Kumagai-san had read them all. He put them back on the table and slowly took a deep breath.

"Phew ----"

He closed his eyes and seemed to be deep in thought. His scary-looking face was even more terrifying now.

There was something like stream coming out of his mouth. Then followed by a very very very very heavy silence…then he said:

"I will announce that result now."

He took a manuscript and put it in the middle.

"This one is more interesting."

That was the one I gave him…the one Kirino wrote.

"…In other words…."

"Yes. I think that this is the real author."

"…Really?"

Wow! As expected of a professional editor! Amazing! He gave us an equal chance with his long time-in-training-author…then he could see whichis the real one! Really good, Kumagai-san! I'm sorry for thinking bad about you before!

I clenched my fist and made a victory pose. Wanting to share this happiness, I turned aside, but all I saw was Kuroneko looking at Kumagai-san in her usual emotionless expression.

"How could it be…."

Fate turned pale, looked like she couldn't believe it. But she quickly turned to Kumagai-san:

"You – are you really my editor? Do you know what are you saying?"

"Of course I know how serious this is. After reporting this to my supervisor, I think it's time for me to retire."

"What…!"

Hearing Kumagai-san said that, Fate had nothing to add.

The author that he took care of made a mistake, so he had to take responsibility for it too.

Kumagai-san knew this, but he still acknowledged that Kirino is the real author of Maisora.

If I were him, could I say the same?

Although this old man made people angry, but he is an honest man.

"Maybe this would be my last work."

Kumagai-san smiled, and calmly said in the same manner that he spoke to Kuroneko a few days earlier:

"…Fate-chan, the manuscript you wrote had the exactly same style and character's conversation of 'Rino' ….But that is all. You just copy the outside, the most important aspect of this is completely different from the real 'Maisora'. The innocent romantic feeling in the first volume, the strange plot twist, the things that excited me, weren't exist in this manuscript, it wasn't interesting at all. It wasn't something 'Rino' would write. We couldn't consider selling this as the sequel for Maisora. Even if that incident didn't happen, you still have to rewrite them – or rather, rethink everything."

"…Ugh…"

Still the merciless way of talking as usual.

Although I thought that he could have made it easier to hear.

Hearing that 'this wasn't something Rino would write' , 'couldn't consider selling this as the sequel for Maisora' – Fate had the same reaction like Kuroneko a few days earlier; she hung her head in defeat.

Kumagai-san took the manuscript Kirino wrote and said:

"On the other hand, this is, without a doubt, written by Rino. To tell the truth, now it's even more interesting. Although there was some part that was even more ridiculous than the first volume, but I like it. Especially the ending, with the climax that moved people as much as Kanon's true route. It totally captured my heart. I'm sure that everyone who loved Maisora will love it too."

Next, he made an U-turn and praised Kirino's manuscript.

That was the first time I saw him praise a manuscript this way.

That was because Kirino's manuscript is that good, I should feel happy – but at the same time, a strange unhappy feeling appeared in my chest.

I unconsciously bit my lower lip.

The plan was going on smoothly --- but why am I feeling this way?

Of course, compare to my regret, that woman must have felt a hundred times worse.

"…Is that so. My story…isn't interesting…?"

Fate whispered. She looked a dozen year older, all willpower depleted.

But will she admit that she stole someone else's novel? According to Fate, Kumagai-san's decision is his personal opinions only.

As long as she kept pretending, it was entirely possible that this will drag out.

But I had no other cards on my hand ---

Time passed. Then finally, a smile appeared on Fate's face, and then she whispered in a calm tone:

"Ah…I remember. 'To tell the truth, the content is quite interesting'…that was the first praise that you gave me."

"It was."

Kumagai-san nodded in nostalgia.

"Middle school, third year wasn't it? I took part in the amateur competition back then they called it the Dengeki Game Grand Prize though… my novel made it into the final round and you called me… and invited me to the editorial department in Ochanomizu…"

It was a common to publish the winning novel of the amateur competitions, but there were also cases if aneditor'swilling to take on authors who hadn't won at their own discretion. Recruit them, so to speak.

"…So nostalgic. I was criticized for four hours straight. I felt so terrible."

I could understand why Kuroneko stopped too. Because what was happing to Fate right now had happened to us before.

"Ahaha…thinking back, it was so embarrassing… although it wasn't that bad back then – they were full of Chuunibyou Jakigan stuffs, which I even called them interesting…I was full of confidence…Back then, I was so …miserable."

Fate gave Kuroneko a glance full of pity.

"Yes. That's right. You were almost the same as me back then. From the way you talk to your clothes….look, even it was a coincidence; we even had a mole in the same place. So…that's why I couldn't suppress my anger when I saw you speak. Listen to me….you have no friends at all, don't you? You are totally isolated at school , aren't you? Then you convinced yourself that you are special, unlike the lower life forms. You looked down on the other, pushing your own incompetence and isolation on others, and then escape to the world of fiction. 'Ahh, if terrorists came and attacked this class, I would awaken the dark powers hiding inside me, massacre the attackers , and save these ignorant dogs around me'… can you

honestly tell me that you've never thought that in the middle of class, looking around the room aimlessly with your head in your hands?"

"……..."

Kuroneko didn't answer. I noticed that her eyes widened, and then she immediately reverted back to the usual emotionless expression.

She never told Fate that she wanted to become a novelist – but that woman kept talking nonstop. No, that woman must be talking about herself.

"…It got nothing to do with the current situation."

I answered in Kuroneko's place, but Fate didn't seem like she heard me, she kept talking:

"In short – this came from me, the one with a lot of real life experience – you should hurry up and wake up from that dream. Life is not that simple, sometime there was a dream that you couldn't reach no matter what, not to mention a lot of things that you couldn't do anything about. Look at how miserable I am now – isn't that the best example?"

"I told you ----"

Hot-blooded filled my chest, I was about to interrupt her, but she cut me off:

"I know. You are talking about Rino's cell phone novel right? Hahaha, it's so ridiculous. Me, who spent ten years in writing, sometimes having to sacrifice my sleeping time, yet my novel was 'not interesting'. A brat who had only began writing for a few months; a half-hearted novel written without an understanding of the rule is called 'interesting'? A rising novelist?A promising big hit ? Ha – what the hell is going on? How is that happening? This world is so messed up!"

"You, you….."

Her annoying rants were really getting on my nerves, when I was about to shut her up ---

" --- You are right --- I understand."

The sudden interruption stopped me for good. I turned around.

The one who agreed with Fate's rant was Kuroneko.

She spoke in a very low tone, like a curse coming from the deepest part of hell:

"The novel I wrote was rated lower than dirt, how could such crappy cell phone novel get such praised? Impossible! Even though the things I despise the most are well received while what I wrote was insulted and criticized. What do you mean I can't just write what I want? Wasn't she doing the same thing when she wrote that? Why am I the only one whose work is completely rejected?"

Kuroneko stoke in her usual emotionless tone, but there was a invisible pressure. Her words had the same hatred as Fate's word.

"Hey hey hey hey hey! Hey hey! What are you talking nonsense now?"

Facing this sudden development, I couldn't help but lecturing Kuroneko.

It was so hard to get there, you know? Now she had confessed her motive, all we need to do is push her into a corner and forced her to admit her crime!

We were almost there!

Why are you saying that now?

But – looked like I was not the only who was confused. Fate's eyes widened.

It was understandable too. Because the same one who had cursed her earlier is now protecting her.

"…What…are you saying?"

"Hm, I said I could understand your feelings. Although I hasn't spent as much time as you, for three years, I has also read guide book for writing, learning how to write novels from the Internet, learning from the others….I never stopped writing what I think is the best, so now I'm very frustrated…Ah, I can't stand it! It's so frustrating! You can say that I'm so jealous of her that it became a grudge. The one who was having fun when writing and show it off with such an arrogant expression after writing something like this…and the editor who praised it should go die already – you must think this way too, right?"

"…No, I'm not…."

"Liar! Admit your true feelings! You must think that ' You deserved it! Die! That author, Kumagai, die already!' , don't you? Now it had come to this, what are you afraid of?"

Why are you taking her side? And you are telling your true feeling, aren't you?

"Ha – that girl, from the first time we meet, I already didn't like her. She had the total opposite opinions in everything we talked about. Every time she opened her mouth, it was to boast about herself then look down on me – then a few months ago she began writing this crappy cell phone novel, which is going to be published. Are you kidding me, how could this world be so unreasonable?"

"You…which side you are on? Didn't you come here to help reclaim Kirino's cell phone novel?"

Hearing I yelled, Kuroneko snorted:

"Are you asking which side I belong to? Are you an idiot? From the beginning, I had told you that I was interested in this, why should I help you to fix your own mistake?"

So she didn't say that to hide her embarrassment….!

"Hm, and you have no right to tell me that either. Don't you feel frustrated because everything is about your little sister?"

"That…that…that got nothing to do with this!"

"Nothing to do with this? Ha, who cares! I always speak whatever I want to, whenever I want to."

"Even if that was a joke, there are things that you aren't allowed to say!"

Are you Kirino now? Why does your way of talking sounded exactly the same as my little sister?

What are you trying to do, ignoring the real criminal and taking over this dungeon as the last boss?!

See, Fate, the one whose role you stole was totally confused, unsure what to do!

Really! Leaving that sudden outburst aside – but…can Kuroneko truly understand Fate's feeling?

The depressed feeling when the result that you get by slowly accumulating your efforts was over taken by someone who wasn't even trying to.

The pain when none of your effort was paid off, when the world only accepted what you hated.

Someone had their effort paid off; someone could having fun while working.

But you were always had a hopeless situation, when reality wasn't what you expected.

True, I had no right to tell anyone that, because my situation was similar to them.

But I can't say that I understand their feeling, because I have no right.

But I could understand my little sister, who was totally different from me.

The misery when I realized that no matter how hard I tried, I could never win against her.

I could understand the frustration when someone like that was next to me every day.

And the helpless feeling when I know there is nothing I could do to change that.

Why was everything good happened to my little sister ?

--- Ah, this is why.

Now I realized.

So that was it! That was it!

The strange, mixed feeling on my chest was nothing but rotten jealousy.

Because of Kirino's novel was stolen, her effort was for naught.

To tell the truth, I felt relieved.

But when I saw my little sister's painful expression --

" --- Serves her right! That was payback for always looking down on me and Kuroneko."

Until now, a part of me truly thought that 'Why is she so talent? Why does everything she do turn out to be so

smooth?' – that ugly jealous that made me hate Kirino – and it only got worse recently – because after we became closer, I finally found out how amazing she is.

Really, as her elder brother, I'm so pathetic.

When I saw Kirino holding back on the verge of tears, I felt ashamed of myself.

So I was got so worked up…I wanted to do something for her, not letting her effort to go waste.

And maybe, just now, about Kuroneko who said negative things about Kirino was also ---

"…I don't care for this girl no matter what, much less helping her. That kind of girl should face more painful experiences."

Although everything she said was her true feeling, but at the same time it was a lie. An excuse. A bluff. She said 'I don't care', 'It's none of my business', but all you have to do is ask her 'If that is none of your business, then what are you doing', she would be speechless, unable to do anything but making up more excuse.

"Ah, I'm so pissed off! I'm soooooooooo pissed off! Sleep or awake, this world pissed me off so much. If only a bomb came down and destroyed this world!"

I understood the irritation she was feeling very well. I understood this helplessness feeling she was feeling right now better than anyone else.

That's right. Two of us didn't come here for Kirino. We came here for us.

We were just here helplessly trying to do something about these feelings of helplessness.

Even if everything went well, I absolutely don't want my little sister to thank me.

I'm sure that Kuroneko thought so too.

If someone ask what do we think about Kirino – I think that both me and Kuroneko will have the same answer.

That girl, I really really really really hate her! But ----

"But that was two different things."

To tell the truth, I don't know what Kuroneko felt when she said those words.

But that was exactly that. I really hate my little sister, really really hate her!

My beautiful, full of talent little sister, who I was always compared to, who always made me feel like a defeated dog, always looking down on me, always treating me like an idiot ---

But even that, I could only shout like this! Because I'm her elder brother!

"Hey, Setsuna-san – listen to me!"

"…..!"

Hearing me suddenly speak to her, Fate's body trembled.

I ignored her and yelled:

"What you stole is my little sister novel, which she put all of her effort in! She tried her best to finish it! She got the reference she needed with the elder brother that she hated the most. She was having a fever, but she still kept

working on her cell phone even when she couldn't even get up. Compare to me, she tried much, much harder, that's why her result is that good. You don't see that – but don't speak like it was something she did without effort!"

I was yelling at myself. That was my anger toward me, who due to his jealous with his totally different little sister, who considered her a special case and ignored Kirino's effort.

"Of course I don't know how much effort you had spent – but don't you dare saying that Kirino didn't spend any effort! Don't look down on my little sister!"

Seeing my sudden anger, everyone's attention focused on me.

"…Idiot, we are talking, don't interrupting us."

"…What do you understand?"

Both Kuroneko and Fate looked at me, signaled me to step aside.

But! I expressed my anger!

“I said I don’t know! Listen to me! Do you know? Do you? The most useless person here is me! The most pathetic person here is also me! I don’t know your feeling , but this face is unchangeable. Unlike you, I never tried anything! I have such amazing little sister next to me, but I never tried to get close to her or learn anything from her! Compare to me, you two already tried much more!”

I really wanted to tell them that, and I did say it out unconsciously.

"You two are so admirable! You two are amazing! I like you two! Amazing!"

"What ---…"

"……!"

I could see Fate's eyes widened. Next to me, Kuroneko also took a breath.

But I had no time to care about that.

I clenched my fist, gritted my teeth and shouted:

"That's why -- the fact your effort don’t get any result is unchangeable, maybe it is the truth. But don’t say that!

Don’t look down on yourself! Then, compare to you, me - who never tried anything - what should I do? Should I die? Even I think so too, damn it!...."

"Nii-san…do you know how incoherent you are saying right now? And why are you crying?"

"Shut up! Because you two are mocking me! Anyway, return it to me! This is something very important for my little sister! I beg you, return it to me! I will do anything, as long as you don’t steal her effort! Don’t erase your own effort like that! Damn it, I don’t know how to say it …maybe you don’t understand what am I saying -- in short, I beg of you!"

I nearly slammed my head on the table and begged Fate.

"…You, you…"

Seeing how desperate I was, Fate widened her eyes. She must think that I'm a big siscon, but I'm not.

"How unsightly…Nii-san…I really couldn’t stand you. "

Kuroneko told me in a mocking tone, then turned to Fate:

"…I will ask you the same too. To publish the novel you wrote on your own, to let many people read it -- this is a happy and wonderful thing isn't it? You yourself should know that better than anyone."

I can't believe that pleading tone was coming from the same one who was shouting jealousy and hated a few seconds before. Now, Kuroneko sounded gentle, calm…. and full of sincerity.

"Please return this for her. No matter how much our effort was in vain, no matter how deep our regret, our jealous was, the ends didn’t justify the means. I don’t care if you don’t approve of me, but don’t look down on yourself; look down on what you have done. Otherwise …I will curse you to death."

This was her decision, wasn't it…Even if I didn’t interrupt, she would still say so. Really….yet she said ' who care about that girl'…seemed like I'm not the one who spoke nonsense…Haha!

I had already crying at this point. No good, after calming down I would felt embarrassed to death.

A short distance away, Fate listened to my rambling and Kuroneko's sincere request -- she took a deep breath and let it out, gave up.

"…You two…just saying whatever you think…and in combination, it felt like a mess…That's why I said I don't like brats. Now I know why Rino's novel is so fragmented. If you two are the model of two main characters, of course it would turn out like this ---"

She dropped her shoulders and spoke softly:

"….Now, I think that I could write something like ' Maisora' like the real Rino…"

This was her declaration of defeat.

This time, I had begged her with nothing but my motivation, without any reasoning.

But even that, I believed a part of what I wanted to say had reached her.

"Hm, say, don't you two hate your little sister?"

Seemed like she didn't understand our complicated feeling, but that was understandable.

Because I'm her elder brother, so that can't be help --- this is just an excuse, a way to force myself to accept those complicated feeling that I'm feeling right now. Although I did hate her very much, there was nothing else I could say in this situation. These unstoppable urges could only be understood by someone in my place.

And then ---

"Hmmm…."

Before I raised my head, Kuroneko answered:

"I'm not boasting, but I had few friends too."

Missing her expression at this point was my lifetime regret.

After that --- well, I need to conclude this too.

Fate Iori Setsuna admitted that she stole someone else's novel - uhm, I still unsure what should I call her -- anyway, let's go with Fate like we did before.

She stole Kirino's novel because after she looked at her submission in the 'Cell phone i-Club' and was moved.

"…Maybe you will think that is strange considered how much I criticized that before, but it was very interesting. Of course the writing style was bad, the grammar was terrible…If I read it a few years earlier, I will think 'I want to kill that author'. But this novel made me realize 'The author really had fun when writing this', like she is standing in front of her reader and shout 'look, this is me'. Ten years ago, I was like this too. The first time I wrote a novel, I had the same feeling with her. I must have laughed while writing, always think of how to continue this event, then I felt so excited…Thinking back, somehow I felt a deep regret, like I was a fool…."

Then she gave in.

"…I'm really, really sorry. I don't know why I did it. I'm not the real Rino, of course I couldn't write something like this -- I already know that."

"Then told it to her directly."

"Uhm…you are right."

Kumagai-san also bowed to me:

"I want to apologize to. I'm very sorry. I will personally apologize to Rino-sensei later."

Then he continued:

"The exciting part of a cell phone novel is what Fate-chan had felt. In my opinion, everyone had ' something that only that person could do', and this is something that could move people. Actually, not only cell phone novel, no matter if this was a doujinshi, doujinshi game or web novel, even submissions on Nico nico or Pixiv are the same. Among them, there are many that held the author's intention 'I wanted to show my real self now'. After it was polished into a commercial product, that interesting aspect is gone. Cell phone novel existed in order to maximize this advantage -- and should it become successful, it means that amateur works could sometime win against professional work. Of course I couldn’t deny the fact that many of them were very

lacking a lot --- but to reject all of those work which had both good and bad side simple because of that is too foolish."

"On the other hand, Fate-chan and Kuroneko-san. Your novel wasn't interested enough for us, we had no choice but to reject them. I think that will happen again too. But I believe what you two want to write could still move a lot of people. In short…."

He grinned:

" ---- Please try your best!"

Hearing that, even thought Kuroneko replied in her nasty tone as usual -- but I could see fire on her eyes, a fire that promises that someday, she will make that old man look at her differently.

And then ---

Fate-san contacted Kirino and waited until she recovered from her illness, then together with Kumagai-san, they told her what happened (of course minus the part about me and Kuroneko) before apologizing.

Kirino only said "Ah, that is fine, I don’t mind" then forgave them. Although I thought "Brat, you were crying " but, well, aside from me, Saori or Kuroneko, my little sister is very gentle to everyone. Uhm, that's why although her real self is pretty violent, the neighborhood gave her such good ratings. It's so unreasonable!

By the way, everything above was told to me by Kirino or Fate.

"You seem to have an interest in this, so I will tell you now."

"I don’t care! Hm, in other words, the book was published under your name, right?"

"Yes. But it's so troublesome, my pen name is now Rino. Kumagai-san also said that would make it sell easier. Hm ~ but ~"

"But what?"

"Nothing…ah ~ I felt that….something is off. Because while I was sick, everything was solved by itself ~ of course I don’t plan to do anything …."

"Ha ~ what are you saying? Shouldn’t you be happy?"

I listened to my little sister with a complicated feeling.

…Also, although I don’t want to say it, but my relationship with Kirino didn’t change at all.

This incident allowed me to see many things, but none of it had any use.

Even if I knew the reason, the fact that I hate my little sister will not change --

"…Sorry for everything until now, Kirino."

"? Did you say something?"

Nothing. Nothing at all!

Time passed. Now is February. After that, like she wanted to make up for the time she lost, Kirino threw herself in club activities and work. Since I didn’t see her work on her cell phone anymore, I couldn’t help but ask. She answered:

"Ah ~ that huh. I don’t write anymore."

Although the sequel was approved, she decided to not write. Since the manuscript was done, now she had nothing to do.

Because of that incident last time, I knew how hard it was to get your book published - thus her answered caught me off guard. *Don't you know…that there was someone who spent ten years without being able to publish a single book? You really…gave it up so easily?*

And did Kuroneko know about this?

Although I still had some questions, but Kirino had made up her mind, 'Rino' had apologized to Kumagai-san and her reader. At least she had a professional attitude or rather a strong sense of duty.

"Because now I have many things else to do, so based on priority, I have to give up on cell phone novels. When I caught an illness because of overworked, I became aware of that."

"Something else to do? You mean play new eroges?"

"That…of course that too!"

I knew it! You! You! Because I want to play eroge, I couldn’t write anymore -- if your reader heard you said that, they would curse you to death! Really, that's why I hated natural talent born people. They had very good result, but they kept looking for more. For people who had to try hard at everything, this is unacceptable.

"You must be thinking of something rude don’t you!Of course not only because of eroge!"

"Then what?"

"Ha? Why should I tell you?"

Ah? Is that so? Fine, I won't ask anymore!

Leaving that aside, today Kirino gathered her otaku group at my home.

Also, this was the first time Saori came to our home.

I said that like it was a long time ago because it had been a few months since Kirino, Kuroneko and Saori (and me too) gathered.

Of course that was because we didn’t go to the same school. Not to mention a lot of things happened.

Today, we gathered in a 'reunion for a group of friend who hadn’t seen each others for a long time party'. That name alone could make people smiled, but ---

"Say, aren’t we suppose to continue our previous anime appreciation? Then we should continue watching the other half of Meruru! But you said you wanted to play Siscalypse! Why should I call you to my house and play something you good at? Hey, are you listening to me, you damn cat!"

"Ha? Isn't it normal for the host to please the guests? Today I had to waste a day break to visit your house, yet the host tried to force me to do what she wanted? What is the meaning of this? I even brought a present for you ---"

--- They were like that from the beginning. Shouldn’t they have something else to say to each other? Or rather, that kind of quarreling is the way their friendship manifested?

By the way, we were at my house's living room. As usual, when I brought snack and drink back from the kitchen, those two had already quarreling.

Because I was afraid that they will spill the drink, I didn’t dare come close to the table.

"…Is this the present you were talking about?"

Kirino's temple popped, she took an A4 paper out.

Kuroneko gracefully fold her arms, nodded and said in a super mocking tone:

"Yes, it is. You should thank me, I searched the Internet for comments regard 'Maisora'. As its author, Rino-sensei, you must really care about how they view your novel right?"

"Yeah! So you picked a bunch of criticize against ' Maisora' then printed them out and gave me? How nasty you could be?"

"…Oh my, I was wronged. This is the proof of our friendship. I was worried that you will be spoiled by reviews from those foolish generous readers, so I gave you a very gentle advice."

"I don't need your worry! What advice? Haha ~ it looked like you're jealous to me, you damn wannabe!"

Kirino repeated 'Wannabe, wannabe, wannabe' while taunting Kuroneko.

"Wow ahahaha ~ ahahaha ~ Eheheheh ~"

She kept kicking and clapping and said while looking directly at Kuroneko:

"Say, what do you feel right now? Tell me? What do you feel when someone like me, who just began writing made a debut before you? If you don't like it, how about publish one on your own? To harass me like a child to ease your frustration, as an author don't you feel any embarrassment?"

"….Ohh grrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr……"

Kuroneko's expression changed into something that shouldn’t be seen, I wondered what it is that she was thinking….

To protect Kirino's cell phone novel, Kuroneko had helped her so much.

Not only was she criticized hastily, she even had a big quarrel against Fate, she also showed us her true, ugly jealousy. But even so, she still said 'that is that' and begged to get Kirino's novel back.

Now all she got in returned was being taunted ' Wannabe, wannabe' by the same one she helped. That was too much to bear.

--- No, I can't say that.

Both me and Kuroneko did that to solve the jealous in our heart, not because we wanted to help Kirino, so we never expected to hear her thanks us.

Because I'm her elder brother, this can't be help. Because she is her friend, this can't be help.

Maybe that was just an excuse, but those words had more meaning than that. Even if we don’t say it out, both me and Kuroneko understood this point.

That's right. This should be enough of that incident.

Ha, first, I meant, if Kirino knew the truth, we would kill ourselves out of embarrassment. That's why I and Kuroneko will carry the secret about this incident with us to our grave.

And about what I gained…well, I made a strange camaraderie with Kuroneko.

Both me and Kuroneko had the same feeling when it came to Kirino.

This was a gathering of Kousaka Kirino's victim, a meeting of some jealous, envy small-role people.

There were only two members of this group : me and Kuroneko. This uncute little sister of mine really gone overboard ---

But no matter how pissed off I was, there was nothing I could do. Thus, I copy President Kuroneko and teased Kirino.

"Hey hey Kirino, you are an amazing author, aren't you? Should you really speak so arrogantly towards your readers, who spent their time to read your book? They had to give up their precious time for that, you know? Thus, you should be a good girl and listen to their opinions, shouldn't you?"

"Are.You.An. Idiot!?"

I had never heard such honest word from my little sister before.

She must be the only one with such fierce personality. I believed that not every author was like her.

After shouting 'Are you an idiot' to me, looks like Kirino realized something. She took that stack of papers and carefully read one of them.

"…Say, this URL of that review, I think I have seen it in your SNS profile…"

"Yes, that is my review."

"…What?"

Due to the sudden anger and surprise, Kirino's face froze and turned into (˚). Then, with stiffed movement, she whispered:

"Kuh…kuh….kuh!!!"

"If you are trying to crow, you are doing a good job."

"I'm gonna kill you! I will split you into eight pieces! You, you, you….!"

"Ki -- Kiririn-shi! Calm down! What are you going to do with that ashtray?"

When I was about to step up and stopped her, Saori had positioned herself in front of Kirino.

However, seeing this, Kuroneko poured oil into the fire:

"Ha - as expected of a cell phone novel author, looks like your vocabulary is quite lacking."

"Ohyaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa! You -- you! I will remember this! Listen well! I will definitely fill your blog with nothing but flames!"

"Hm, go ahead. I'm waiting for you. As someone who had experience the golden age of text-based web, I will let you experience my true power…"

"Ah ~ ah ~ still full of jakigan as usual! Because of that, your blog post was buried deep under gross comments! And, why are you wearing the same gothic loli clothing today? Are you a character from Digital Cute Eroge?"

"You…what did you just say? You just step on my forbidden landmine…You round face model! Since this is a good chance, I will make it clear: you are still a middle age school girl, but your make up is thicker than a wall! Don't come too close to me, otherwise that bitch-smelling-perfume will stuck on me too!"

"Shut up! I think that sometimes you should consider changing your clothes too!"

For the next ten minutes, they continued their quarrel nonstop.

I took that chance to ask Saori and found out that the reason they quarrel was because a conflict opinions when asked 'What should we do first'.

Wasn't that a reason for elementary kid to quarrel? A 15 and 16 years old girl will quarrel because of that?

I was feeling tired just from listening, but somehow Saori looked very happy. I think that was because she was happy for this reunion.

Then, her happiness grew to me. Although I knew the answer already, I still asked:

"Hey…what are you smiling for?"

"Just thinking about our first meeting…I can't believe that it had been half a year…ah, time surely flies."

"You are right."

It sure it. Not only that, in half of a year, I had changed so much. For better or worse.

If I didn’t pick that DVD box that my little sister dropped -- now I wouldn’t be here with them…That was what I thought. Now, to me, Kuroneko and Saori weren’t 'my little sister's friends' anymore, they are also my friends…important people to me. Although we rarely get a chance to meet, but friendship wasn’t something that could be count by the number of meeting, was it? Haha, that wasn't like me to say that at all.

--- When I was thinking about the past, suddenly Kirino broke off her quarrel with Kuroneko and interrupted:

"What? What are you two talking about?"

"Hahaha, nothing at all, Kiririn-shi. About what should we do first -- we were saying that since this is a good chance, do you want to do 'the same thing as our first meeting'.?"

"What do you mean?"

Hearing that, Kuroneko asked. I immediately knew what was she asking.

"You meant that -- if I remember correctly …. Take turn and speak in order right?"

"As expected of Kyousuke-shi, you immediately knew that am I talking about -- 'Self-introduce in order' - yes, that's this game."

That count as a game too?

Kirino remembered and nodded:

"Ah, that huh?"

"So nostalgic..hm hm…on our first meeting, you huddled up like a thrown away kitten…."

"That…."

Hearing Kuroneko pointed the situation that time out, Kirino blushed.

"You…back then, you were the same as me too!"

"Stop quarreling..hahaha…so nostalgic! Then you two get along because of anime topic…"

" -- Don't say stupid thing! Who would get along with this girl…."

"Who would get along with her?"

Both of them denied. Yes yes, it was like this. Back then, they had a quarrel because of the difference between Meruru and Maschera. Since then, they were always like that. From the look of it, both of them didn't change at all. Just thinking about it made me smile.

…But what is going on? Am I reminiscing? Ack ack, this wasn't good. I can't believe I was reminiscing about me and my little sister.

Hm, of course it's not like I'm happy or anything.

Once again, Saori separated Kuroneko and Kirino from their glaring duel, then in order to change the course of their argument, she threw another topic :

"In short, this time, whoever had the most interesting answer to our topic can decide 'what should we do next'. Then I will start, the topic is 'What is the most unexpected thing happened recently'. Follow our previous order - first, Kuroneko-shi, please began!"

"…Don’t decide that on yourself."

Kuroneko's answer was the same at that time. In my opinion, although she said that, but the truth is she didn’ t hate it one bit. Then she answered in the same tone back then:

"Let's see…hm…'The most unexpected thing happened recently'…in that case…."

Without changing her expression, Kuroneko turned to Kirino and calmly whispered:

"Your brother confessed to me, he said he 'like me the most'."

"Cough cough cough cough cough cough cough cough cough cough……"

I was chocked! Kuroneko ---! You! You you..! What are you trying to do…!?

I did say that, but the exact word wasn't like that! This …!

Damn! Because I was choked so bad, I couldn’t be able to make an excuse!

During that time, Saori leaned forward and raised her voice:

"What -- is that mean? Please tell us everything!"

"…Sorry, I can't do that. This is our secret, right -- Nii-san?"

"She called you Nii-san! Even if your brain was corrupted by eroge, that was too much Kyousuke-shi!"

"No, it's not like that --! Saori, you knew that better than anyone, why did you said that!?"

"What are you talking about, Kyousuke-shi?"

Those two ~! Just you wait! I clenched my first, my whole body trembled.

Next to them, the one who didn't join in and teased me just now - Kirino threw me a contempt look and a single word:

"…Gross…."

She looked very uncomfortable, probably because she doesn't like me get close to Kuroneko.

Look, you guys! She must feel that 'her friend was taken away'. After I figured that out, I couldn't help but smile. But because of Kirino's opinion, Kuroneko's answer won't get a good chance of winning.

Although Saori said "Next is Kiririn-shi ---" but the displeased Kirino answered "I'm still thinking…" before turned away. Having nothing else to do, Saori had no choice but to try to move this heavy atmosphere by saying:

"Then next is me. Hm, let's see…. 'The most unexpected thing happened recently'…Um…yes, I have one."

You were the one who decided that topic, but you yourself don't know what to say….However, she seemed to be very good at talking.

Then Saori slammed on the table and announced:

"I wore clothes like this to a marriage meeting, and that person I met fainted immediately."

How could you do something so sad! I had so many things to lecture her that I don't even know where to start. But for her, this wasn't 'The most unexpected thing happened recently'. To go to a marriage meeting should be called ' The most unexpected trauma to whoever I meet."

"You are disqualified….!"

Three of us spoke at the same time. Aside from Saori, it seemed like everyone reached the same conclusion.

“Ah~ I was so confident with that answer - gozaru… well, that’s fine. Then, once again, it’s Kiririn-shi’s turn! Have you thought of anything yet?”

"Um! You are right. Although it's nothing special, but ' The most unexpected thing happened recently' right? Then…."

Kirino spoke in a very normal calm tone:

"I bought a game called “The perverted Aniki”. I thought it was a little sister-based game, but it turned out to be a BL game."

Good. Good. Very good. Very very good!

How messed up this could be..I will never…play any of her 'topic' again.

In short, the otaku reunion ended. A few months without meeting didn’t change their relationship, that alone made me happy.

After Kirino and I saw them off, I returned to my room and read some books. And…well…I mean…I have to try hard too.

After a while…

"Thirsty…"

Doing something that you aren't used to is an easy way to get tired. Maybe I should go wash my face and get a cup of water then come back and try later. Thinking that, I left my room and went to the stairs.

Suddenly ---

"Ugh!"

As soon as I get to the entrance, I collided with my little sister in her plain clothing. Since this is a blind spot, collision is usual.

*Thud*My left shoulder slightly hit Kirino's breast. Although we didn't collide too hard, but her bag dropped on the floor, everything inside fell out.

"Ah…"

"Sorry."

I apologized and was about to reach out and helped her to pick things up…then suddenly my whole body

froze in place…this situation had happened once before …

“I don’t need your help. Don’t touch anything.”

She repeated her words from long ago. Because I stopped before I touched them so unlike before, she didn ’t brush my hand away --

Tch…look, that's our relationship.

I felt like my heart was stuck by needles. I stood up and watched my little sister picked up her cosmetics.

Kirino finished picking up and glared at me before putting on her shoes.

"…Hey!"

"Next time is the last life counseling"

She said as if that was something normal before slammed the door shut.

…What did she just say?

I stood there dumb stuck, looking at the door that my little sister just closed.

Afterword

Hi guys. This is Tsukasa Fushimi. Firstly, I want to thank you for buying this book.

By the time you guys see this afterword, it's already the third successful book I have published.

Other than the fact that I spent more time editing the original script than the last book, in the end, I still couldn't submit the original script, and even after I submitted it, many debates still happened. Was so scared that I actually broke out in cold sweat. And to all those that I troubled, I think I'll use this chance to apologize. Sorry everyone, I created trouble for you guys.

So, that aside, how did everyone find the third sequel?

If you found anywhere to have a good laugh, then I'm already happy enough.

To write this novel, I had quite a lot of people care for me. Firstly,I would want to thank those who've helped me get ideas via Phone novels. Really, I put you guys into so much trouble.

Although this is only a fiction story, I've had so many people help me, and even let lowly "phone novel language" appear...Really sorry.

Of course, we have to thank the illustrations provided by Hiro Kanzaki-sensei. You've made good illustrations, once again.

And to editors ___-san and ___-san , you guys helped me a lot too this time. Especially the part concerning the editorial section, it really helped me a lot. And we really debated a lot during this part. Because of many reasons, I had no choice but to edit certain parts of the novel, and having to care about all sorts of matters too, it also became a point in the novel. For editing my novel non-stop even though you both were so busy at that time , I sincerely thank you both. And also thanks to you both that I did not stop half way in between the novel, and brought out the better side of this novel.

In the afterword section in book one and two, I've said that "This book, although it seems like mine, is actually the work of four people, including the illustrator." I think that concerning this point, nothing has changed at all.

In the second half of this novel I made a character appear, and half of his script was actually created by ___-san. However, even though because of certain reasons I didn't put in certain points, and after adding storylines to the plot, I think I can still say that, he whole-heartedly wanted to tell those teenagers who aimed to become a novelist.

Lastly, it's concerning next chapter.

In the fourth volume, there will be information regarding the turning point in this series. Compared to previous volumes, there will be way lesser situations which are serious, and it'll turn into a more lively stage. Something like the story of Kanako and Ayase during the Cosplay Fest. And also something like Manami visiting the Kyosukes.

Of course, this is only a plan, there might be changes along the way too; who knows.

But I do hope that I can get to 'apply' the 'fruits' that I gained after working so hard, to make everyone have a good laugh.

Please look forward to the next volume.

February 2009, Tsukasa Fushimi.

Translator's Notes

1. ↑ A slang term literally meaning "evil eye" and referring to the common "people with supernatural powers" concept found in anime/manga or referring to people who like such things.
2. ↑ A slang term originating from "Middle School Year 2" that (often with "byou" meaning "sickness" added on) derogatorily refers to being immature or liking immature things.
3. ↑ A slang term referring to the stereotypical trendy Japanese schoolgirl.
4. ↑ The name of a 2ch ASCII art character that speaks in the same type of archaic Japanese Saori used and Kyousuke repeated.
5. ↑ In fanfiction circles this is known as a Peggy Sue fic. [1]
6. ↑ In the West, this is known as a Mary Sue character or, more specifically for this type, God Mode Sue. [2][3]
7. ↑ A simplified explanation of *randoseru* is a backpack for Japanese elementary schoolchildren. [4]
8. ↑ Firefly in Japanese is "hotaru" and hotel is "hoteru".
9. ↑ From Street Fighter.